NORMAN

John Hetherington (The Age): *'There can be no real justification for banning this splendid novel for twenty-nine years. The public should judge for themselves.'*

REDHEAP

Kenneth Slessor (Sunday Telegraph): *'The funniest comedy of an Australian small-town that I have ever read.'*

LINDSAY

Redheap

by
NORMAN LINDSAY

HERE is a novel of small-town life in Australia, richly alive and funny enough to make you laugh aloud.

Redheap is the second of Norman Lindsay's novels to be published. It was originally issued in 1930 and immediately banned in Australia. This new edition is the first to be made available to the Australian public.

To quote the original publisher's description: 'It is a remorseless study of small-town life; in one sense to be compared to Mr Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, yet more solid than that magnificent *tour de force* of journalism, and with a more mature and definite philosophy behind it.'

Whilst the pattern of juvenile behaviour may have changed in outward appearance since *Redheap* days, the instinct that is behind the wildness of youth with its urgent quest for real experience is unchanged.

Here, then, is a timeless st

EXTRACTS FROM REVIEWS:

It is the novel I have enjoyed most
tralian literature.
(*The Sun*, S

Norman Lindsay is one of the fe
geniuses Australia has produced.
(*The Sydney Morning*

This novel will undoubtedly claim
portant place in Australian literatu
(The Newcastl

32227
LINDSAY

P.
V8 | 16/-
858 | 60

REDHEAP

HERE is a novel of small-town life in Australia, richly alive and funny enough to make you laugh aloud.

Redheap is the second of Norman Lindsay's novels to be published. It was originally issued in 1930 and immediately banned in Australia. This new edition is the first to be made available to the Australian public.

To quote the original publisher's description: 'It is a remorseless study of small-town life; in one sense to be compared to Mr Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, yet more solid than that magnificent *tour de force* of journalism, and with a more mature and definite philosophy behind it.'

Whilst the pattern of juvenile behaviour may have changed in outward appearance since *Redheap* days, the instinct that is behind the wildness of youth with its urgent quest for real experience is unchanged.

Here, then, is a timeless story.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024

https://archive.org/details/redheap0000lind

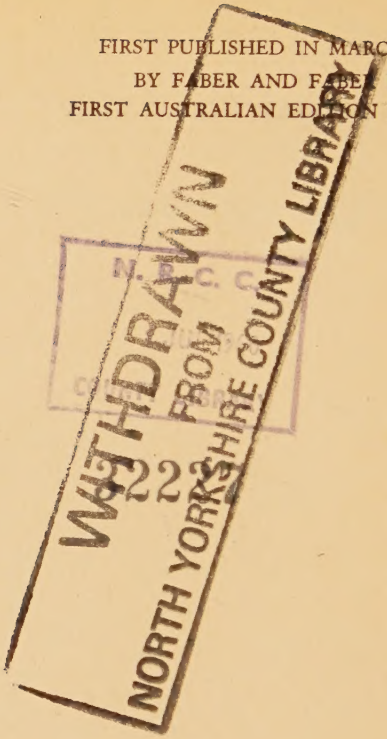
REDHEAP

BY

NORMAN LINDSAY

URE SMITH · SYDNEY

FIRST PUBLISHED IN MARCH MCMXXX
BY FABER AND FABER LIMITED
FIRST AUSTRALIAN EDITION JANUARY 1960



Registered in Australia for transmission by post as a book
PRINTED IN AUSTRALIA BY HALSTEAD PRESS, SYDNEY

CHAPTER I

I

A SMELL of scent soap and bootblacking; sounds of breakfast bustling and suppressed rancour; exhibits of clean collars and hard hats. In short, Sunday morning.

Robert Piper arrived from sleep with a groan, aware of boredom in the air. He opened his eyes and scowled, confirming the prescience of slumber. He scowled at Sunday, and its announcement of shirt socks and singlet laid out by his mother over night. Then he heard the clatter of breakfast dishes and groaned again, in agony. He would have to get up. His eyes closed exhaustedly on a spectacle of abhorred exertions, and at once a delicious languor erased his scowl. In a second he would be asleep again.

A voice, imperative from the area of breakfast, sent an envoy with enormous feet down the passage, but when the door opened it was Robert's small brother Peter who intruded a small round head, like a turnip.

'Ma sez you gotter get up,' he announced.

'To hell with you!' said the sluggard, freshly aroused to scowling. He reached out a hand, as for a missile, and the turnip fled. Robert's hand arrived at a book, which was not thrown but withdrawn automatically to the bed. As its pages fell open he began to read, and at once the malefics of Sunday were smoothed from his brow.

The volume was Pope's Poems. Outside his window the early sunlight cut the landscape into patterns of blue and gold. The tin roofs and bronze foliage of any

Australian country town made up a background that finished with a horizon of blue ranges. Parrots screeched high up in the churchyard trees next door, fowls clucked in the back yard. Spring distilled an odour of dandelions and gum blossoms.

> Heaven first taught letters for some wretch's aid,
> Some banished lover, or some captive maid,

read Robert, frowsing in his blankets, soothed by a gentle jog trot of rhythm tittupping away into an untroubled eternity where the Passions wore perukes and were careful not to disarrange their ruffles.

The breakfast-room door opened with a buzz of voices and his mother called sharply:

'Robert, are you up?'

'Getting up now,' shouted Robert.

For a moment his eye rested on the pile of clean linen, but its compulsion failed and he went on reading. He really wished to get up to avoid the annoyance of being forced up, but the wish, of course, narcoticised the effort.

An intemperate portent of thumping and stamping arrived at his door, which was thrust open, and a face thrust in. It was an old red face, scorched by the fires of an intolerant blood pressure. The message of its eye was rage. Its upper lip was shaved. A fringe of white chin whiskers set it off like a clown's collar and a crest of white hair gave it the impersonation of a fierce cockatoo.

It was, in fact, an uncle's face.

'Ye're not up yet,' it roared.

Robert at once performed the strangulated antics of one arising.

'Getting up now,' he said.

'Gettin' up, indeed,' ranted the intrusion of uncle. 'Have ye no reverence for Goad's day, snoozin' and

lousin' in your blankets. Gettin' up, oh, ay! I'd have ye up with a stick, I would, I would!'

He worked his long upper lip rapidly at a visionary gusto of beating.

'I'd give ye snoozin' and dozin',' he said, and went off with an added zest in bumping and stamping.

'Silly old bughound,' muttered Robert formally, and made some crumbling efforts at arising, till the Wesleyan Church bell next door set up its dismal clamour and brought him out of bed in a fever of haste.

Soap and water, a clean shirt, a clean collar, a new tie, polished boots, his best suit—— Bah! to this toilet for the villainous boredom of church. His manner of dressing was less the proscription of decorum than an assault upon his garments, exhibiting that exhilaration which takes the form of wrenching at collars, tugging at braces, snapping bootlaces, and throwing things about the floor. It put him in a gratuitous exercise of drama, but he somewhat marred this by plastering his hair into one of those mathematical curves across the forehead by which barbers destroy the dignity of a client's appearance.

A small copy of 'Don Juan', disguised in a hymn-book cover, he thrust into his pocket as a resource against local preachers, and darted into the breakfast-room, where his sister Hetty remained to pour out his tea.

Robert commenced snatching mouthfuls of bacon and eggs with the air of a man who eats, not for pleasure, but to spite an intolerable world. His breakfast was lukewarm and the cracked church bell next door exasperated him.

'I'm fed up with this blasted rot,' he exclaimed, as a general expression of emotion inspired by the Sabbath.

'I wish someone would teach you to brush your hair decently,' said Hetty. 'You look like a butcher boy.'

Exchanges between these two were marked by the superficial animosity of habit. They were both too much of the same family mould to exhibit the virtue of tolerance. Besides, Hetty was twenty-four, and an elder sister's dignity insists that younger brothers are fools. She was the dominant personality of this household; an eminence insisted on by her good looks and her air of assurance. Robert resented it without questioning it. At that period all who stood for the authority of home he viewed with darkened eye.

'You'd better hurry,' said Hetty austerely. 'The bell's stopping.'

She gave a final touch to her mass of black hair, which shone with purple highlights, and went out. Robert wasted some time looking for a penknife in order to make an entertainment of cleaning his nails while being preached at. His hat was mislaid, too, and he only found it as the bell stopped ringing. Resigned to depression, he hurried out to where Hetty, Peter and his father waited at the front gate.

'Tut! tut!' exclaimed Mr. Piper. 'You're always late——' He seized the gate violently, but instead of opening it, remained counting the spokes, in an effort to recall something forgotten. The futility of this performance ended in another attack of exasperation.

'Where's your Uncle Jobson?' he exclaimed.

'In the fowlhouse,' said Peter, who could be relied on for information of that sort.

Uncle Jobson chose to renounce a Sabbath affinity with fowls by hurrying round the house with the air of a man whose patience is exhausted.

'Ye're ready, it seems,' he shouted with scorn. 'An'

me waitin' on ye this hour.'

Uncle Jobson's temper, like his corns and his bell-topper and his armour-plated frock coat, was as much a part of the Sabbath routine as the church bell. Attending his unseasonable frock coat, he wore a pair of woollen wrist protectors, while from the interior of his hat depended a red bandana handkerchief, in pleasing harmony with the colour of his face.

'Where's yon Ethel?' he demanded, marshalling the family under his eye.

'She's not coming,' said Hetty impatiently.

'Then what are ye keeping Goad's house waitin' for?' demanded Uncle Jobson. He stamped out ahead of the procession, which followed reluctantly, ashamed of this intemperate relative who thrust self-consciousness on any public association with his presence.

Robert had grown up with the procedure of Sabbath worship, and an impartial vision of it was denied him, if impartiality was possible to such a dismal ritual. He still retained a childish sense of its inordinate length; measuring the service by its tedium and the misery of sitting still. Furthermore, he suffered the shame of a family gathering in public, which belittles the dignity of any growing youth.

The presence of Grandpa Piper, too, forced certain obnoxious familiarities on the public.

This old man, who was completely bald, save for some meek hair that dripped over his collar, and whose long white beard and drooping nose gave him the air of a benevolent goat, always preceded the family to church, where he was discovered in an attitude of prayer. As he was intensely deaf and wilfully meek, it was necessary to remove him before the family could enter the pew, and the whole process was done in a shuffling, sneaking

manner which exasperated Robert. The behaviour of Uncle Jobson was even worse to bear. He made almost as much noise as the parson. Prayer with him was an exercise of groans, mutterings and snorts. He had the art of blowing his nose like a trumpet, and his 'Amens' were ejected at the pulpit with the severity of a reprimand. Even the text was repeated aloud after the parson, with the air of one who corrects rather than corroborates. Sometimes he stood up, to count the congregation, and when, as a churchwarden, it behoved him to take the plate round, he bestowed a further hint of criticism by deliberately adding up the amount donated.

Robert was incapable of finding diversion in such antics from a relative. His age absolved him from dismissing even an uncle with contempt. Fortunately, he sat in a pew separate from the rest of the family, which was already over-crowded, and this isolation preserved a faint sense of dignity. It permitted him also to read poetry during the sermon, though Haidee, the mistress of dreams, is wooed a little vaguely to the tune of hymns.

To-day, in the absence of the local parson, one Mr. Mankletoe, a blacksmith, preached. This amateur expounder was a frenzied little man with a black chin-beard like a bottle-brush, a shaven upper lip, and the eye of a mad dog. As a public entertainer he had certain advantages among the order of lay brethren. He was active, vociferous, entirely uneducated, and extremely undignified. His pronunciation was inspired by the shape rather than the spelling of words, and he was not above bringing a pair of large black hands into the pulpit as an aid to the process of expounding.

To-day he got a hair in his mouth, and in his efforts to dislodge it spat (religious ecstasy never countenanced

the graces) on the bald head of old Sandy Wilkinson, who was permitted a seat close under the pulpit on account of his deafness. The success of this exploit was greatly assisted by old Sandy's efforts to remove the offensive moisture with a red silk handkerchief, and a grateful snigger went through the congregation.

Robert was pleased with this donation to monotony, though he chose to reward the pulpit pranks of Mr. Mankletoe with scorn.

His eye, ranging the congregation, had already noted a strange girl in the parson's sitting. This he divined to be the new parson's daughter, and as a further compliment to Mr. Mankletoe's powers as an entertainer he discovered that she was giggling into a handkerchief.

On the encouragement of these giggles he became mentally busy with this arrival of a girl, for besides being new and strange she was young and plump, and had a lot of thick brown hair tied back by a black ribbon. In spite of the intolerable stays of that era, the outline of her breasts could be divined, and Robert at once forgot to identify himself with those delicious girls in the Harem. By a process at once automatic and inspired, he began to manufacture a love episode with the parson's daughter instead. It was a diversion he frequently employed to mitigate the boredom of church, sporting, like Sam Pepys, with Lady Castlemaines selected from the congregation.

Now, with the parson's daughter well under his eye, he got through the service efficiently. As always, he was the dupe of a conviction of enterprise in these mental ravishings, and thought of dashing round to the vestry door when the service was over, and there becoming known to her. Of course, he did nothing of the sort. It was sufficient that she had succumbed to

passion three times before Mr. Mankletoe extemporised his final prayer, and Robert at once forgot all about her in the relief of escape. His celerity in getting out of church was the only piece of voluntary activity he contributed to a religious observance of the Sabbath.

II

It was a formality in the Piper household that there should be a guest to Sunday's dinner, and that guest usually found himself attached officially as a friend of the family, on the understanding that stray bachelors in a country town are the natural property of families with good-looking daughters. The last attaché to the Piper household had been Briggs, a bank clerk, but he had been removed elsewhere, and now it seemed another was about to take his place. Loitering on the verandah before dinner Robert was aware of this by the tone of Hetty's voice in the drawing-room. It was pitched at a throaty inflection very different from the sibilant note used for family purposes. Peering cautiously through the French windows, Robert caught the line of an aquiline profile, a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses, and a pair of very neat shoes. The rest of this personage was sunk in a lounge chair, but his voice impressed Robert as being offensively cultivated.

Ethel came on to the verandah while these observations were making, and Robert nodded her aside into the garden.

'Who's that coot Hetty's got hold of?' he asked.

'Dr. Niven.'

'Who?'

'Niven, the new hospital doctor.'

'Looks a bit of a skite to me,' said Robert.

'He's got a voice,' admitted Ethel.

'Strikes me he's about up to Hetty's class,' said Robert impartially. In the character of submerged juniors Robert and Ethel maintained a defensive intimacy against Hetty, expressed by Robert in the aspect of a moral pariah and by Ethel in the pose of a social incompetent.

But this reserve was temperamental in Ethel. She was a year older than Robert, but her manner still retained a youthful quality of shyness which made her appear ill at ease with strangers. She marked a colour division between Robert and Hetty, too, being as fair as they were dark.

'That voice of Hetty's gives me the pip,' said Robert, making a personal matter of the objection, as usual. He loitered as far as the gate, and remained for some time staring down the road with a return to normal depression.

'Look at the rotten hole,' he said presently. 'Not a blooming soul in sight.'

'There never is at this time,' said Ethel.

'No, but look at it,' said Robert, exasperated. 'What sort of a dog-box is it for a man to spend his life in?'

His gesture at the sleepy little town expressed the vitality which has no reserve against monotony. The pleasant garden that he stood in, filled with flowering shrubs, the colonial house with French windows opening on to its broad verandahs, the plantation of tall trees beyond the fruit garden: to Robert these were but so many symbols of a world stultified by impatient dreams.

Below the house a broad road planted with shade trees met the main street, where one caught a glimpse of shuttered shops. Trees and tin roofs, white gravel roads, sunlight and the scent of gum blossoms made up this prospect, where only the Town Hall tower showed

above the shop roofs with an air of consequence. Yet one façade rose higher than the rest, and even from this distance could be read its legend of 'Piper & Co., Drapers'.

But this, too, was part of an established universe, to be accepted and ignored. Robert reviewed it with impartial discontent, which changed to a more intimate emotion as he glanced up the road.

'Here's that goat Henry,' said he, and moved off round the garden paths. Ethel appeared to have no reason for avoiding her brother Henry and his wife, who dined with the family on Sunday as a matter of course. Henry was the eldest son, and he had married the head milliner out of the shop. This social feat had hardly received the family's benediction, and though the Piper females received Henry's wife with tolerant friendliness it was the tolerance that people in a social difficulty extend to keep themselves in countenance.

If the interloping milliner thought the Piper females snobs she failed to express that opinion. It was her virtue to be tall, pale, characterless and effaced by partial speechlessness. This vocal ineptitude had doubtless been her attraction to Henry, who was a corpulent, talkative creature, of the type that extends to a listener the entertainment derived from the sound of his own voice.

The family good looks had been a trifle submerged in Henry, who had depreciated them by growing an untidy moustache and going bald. Besides, he upheld openly the tradition of Piper and Son, presenting himself on all occasions in the character of a successful draper.

'Hullo!' he said to Ethel, 'where's young Bob?'

Ethel nodded at Robert behind the lilac bushes, and

a flush darkened Henry's countenance.

'Were you with that push last night?' he demanded.

'What push?' asked Robert, emerging.

'You know what push I mean; Pincher and Arnold. They took my gate off its hinges and chucked it over Hocking's fence.'

'What's it got to do with me?' said Robert angrily. 'I was home last night, stewing.'

'Now I'll tell you what, me lad,' said Henry with menace. 'You drop going with that crowd, see. First chance I get, I'll put the police on to them. If you choose to mix up with them, look out. Understand me.'

The dinner gong disturbed these high matters and Henry stepped to the verandah.

'Who've you got to dinner?' he asked, turning to Ethel suspiciously.

'Dr. Niven.'

'Niven, oh yes.'

Under the mantle of a successful draper, Henry moved into the house, humming. Mrs. Henry, with a faint smile at Ethel, followed him.

'Silly ass,' muttered Robert to Ethel. 'Now he'll blither about his old gate at dinner. I'm not responsible if those chaps act the goat, am I?'

Ethel refrained from comment on matters so removed from her vision of life. She waited till all the rest were seated at table, then slid into her place with an embarrassed wriggle.

This was a midday dinner, according to the town's custom, and Mrs. Piper sat at the foot of the table and carved. Years of practice had given her an adroitness in dispensing food. She wore black silk, a heavy gold chain and locket, and filigree bracelets an inch wide, in the fashion of thirty years earlier.

Here was disclosed the genesis of her family's good looks. Mrs. Piper was still what certain middle-aged gentlemen of that era called a 'superb woman', making at the same time an opulent gesture of the arms to express size. But she carried her weight off very well by a graciousness of manner and a voice that was wilfully amiable. Perhaps its social accents were a trifle honeyed. Peter at least, being of that age when one subjects parents to a ruthless scrutiny, considered that this voice of Ma's was 'put on'. Certainly, it fell to a note of urgent warning when correcting a lapse in manners from Peter or issuing a direction to the housemaid.

The guest sat on Mr. Piper's right. On Mr. Piper's left sat Uncle Jobson. On the other side of the guest sat Hetty, and on the other side of Uncle Jobson sat Henry. Below this social hierarchy sat Robert, Ethel, Henry's wife, Peter, and Grandpa Piper, like serfs below the baronial salt, eating on sufferance, of a meek demeanour. Indeed, in this aspect was exposed Grandpa Piper's chosen attitude to life. He was an ancient who surrounded himself with an atmosphere of density, the result of seventy years' indulgence in the Christian vice of resignation. His long white beard, his meek bald head, the mournful expression of his old black eye, his air of long-suffering humility: these were the outward guarantees of one removed from earthly joys.

On the understanding that he was too deaf for conversation the ancient sat at Mrs. Piper's elbow, whence his eye, charged with secret emotion, watched the disposal of all this valuable food. When handed his own portion, he would express amazement at such generous treatment.

'All this for me,' he would say, shaking his head and emitting soft groans of renunciation.

No one was deceived by these pretensions. Behind an anchorite's beard Grandpa Piper concealed a passion for food. Any dishes within his reach were liable to the incursions of his fork, and choice morsels were often abstracted from passing plates with such an air of aloofness that Grandpa Piper appeared to ravish them in a trance.

Uncle Jobson, on the other hand, attacked his dinner in the same spirit as his religion, making it a vehicle for sound. He used his long upper lip like an instrument of suction. He was dictatorial, too, on the matter of his allowance, standing up to announce any deficiency in quantity.

'That'll be mine ye're serving now,' he would remark. 'Then I'll have a bit more stuffing to it. Ay, and the liver wing. An' a bit more cabbage. Yon's apple sauce in the dish. Ye'll give me an extry spoonful——'

A dish of boiled onions was always placed before him. If it was placed elsewhere he removed it instantly.

'The onion is the scavenger of the stomach,' was his stock remark at table. 'A grand food; medicinal.'

Between these two relatives Hetty suffered a Spartan endurance. The graces are hardly worth practising before an uncle and a grandfather of obnoxious table deportment. Short of banishing them to the kitchen she was forced to accept them as a pair of privileged buffoons. Indeed, she upheld the family dignity entirely at the family's expense. Her method was to surround the guest by that species of flattery which takes the form of humour at the expense of all save himself. It implied that he was absolved from being bored by these dull dogs if it pleased him to ignore them.

The younger members of the family endured these underhand tricks as best they might. She called Ethel,

'our Ethel' and Robert, 'our youthful brother' when inviting attention to their insignificance. The understanding of Hetty's tyranny was 'It is sufficient that the family dignity be vindicated in *me*.'

Unfortunately Henry was a class of brother impervious to the ironic manner. With the soup he was already exploding the grievance about his gate.

'The youth of the country appear prone to that sort of humour,' said the doctor, in his cultivated voice, which gave a patronising air to his conversation.

'I'll show them the humour of a charge of swan shot,' said Henry resentfully. 'I know who did it, too. Pincher and Arnold, a pair of young blackguards.'

'Really,' said the doctor politely. Hetty, divining his opinion of Henry, hastened to reassure him in it.

'Henry's one of those good honest souls who delight in a row with the neighbours,' she said. 'How is your feud over the Hocking's dust-bin getting on, Henry dear?'

Henry disdained this badinage. He frowned, his shopkeeper's anger aroused at the thought of damaged property.

'Last Saturday night they broke into the Council Chamber and stole the Mayor's whisky and a box of cigars,' said he. 'If it wasn't them, I'd like to know who it was. And that Masonic Banquet affair; an absolute outrage. Collared the turkeys and put old boots under the covers. And that business of putting a cow in the Baptist Church, and burning old Wishart's stable. Everybody knows they did it but the police.'

The recital of these iniquities threw Uncle Jobson into a passion.

'I'd like to know why ye've no sworn an information agen them,' he exclaimed.

'How am I to prove they did it?' said Henry. 'It's the business of the police to prove these things.'

'Connivin' at a felony,' ranted Uncle Jobson. 'You that calls yourself a councillor, no doubt.'

The refinements of a councillor's position engaging Henry and Uncle Jobson, the conversational centre was again adjusted.

'Who are these ingenious youths?' enquired Niven.

'One of them's a groom, or a billiard marker, or some such thing. The other keeps a bicycle shop.'

'Oh, that chap,' said Niven. 'Yes, I've seen him. He struck me as being rather exceptional in the way of good looks.'

'He is rather,' said Hetty. 'Half the servant girls in the town are distracted over him. In fact, I'm rather in love with him myself. It's not fair that all the charming scandals should be confined to the back kitchens.'

Mrs. Piper saw fit to reprove these levities.

'I only wish they were, Hetty,' she said significantly.

'Oh yes, I forgot the suspect governess. But she's left the district and now we're all badly in need of another scandal. Still, we have hopes of the dashing Arnold.'

'And you know, Doctor,' said Mrs. Piper, 'he has such a nice little wife.'

'Married, is he?' said Niven.

'Married,' said Mrs. Piper impressively, 'with two extremely pretty children.'

'I wish you'd look at Grandpa,' said Ethel in a low voice. 'He's taking all the stuffing.'

Grandpa Piper, indeed, was busy at the goose. With the aloofness of a somnambulist he had already emptied the gravy dish and taken most of the apple sauce. Mrs. Piper cut short these piracies by swiftly removing

his spoon, a piece of strategy that Grandpa Piper had the hardihood to feign unconsciousness of.

But Mrs. Piper was equal to this subterfuge.

'Some stuffing, Grandpa?' said she, and helped him to a spoonful.

'Dear old soul,' said Hetty affectionately. 'I always tell Mother he'd be happier in the nursery, in a bib and tucker.'

Mr. Piper made no presence at his own table at all. He was a silent, abstracted diner, one of those parents who lack the power of communicating their personalities to children and become nonentities in their own households. The proximity of Mr. Piper did not necessarily mean his inclusion in the conversation. Guests caught easily the infection of his family's indifference, and ceased to disturb themselves by an effort to engage his attention. For the rest, he was a tall, spare man, thinly bearded, with the dry flat hands of a draper, and his habit of mental abstraction caused him at intervals to touch the objects about him, as if measuring their distance apart. With Henry alone he appeared to be on some terms of intimacy, but his air of vague enquiry to the rest of the family seemed to suggest that their identity eluded him.

The dinner went its Sunday course, accomplished as a family gathering suppressed in deference to a strange visitor. Hetty surrounded the guest with a practised vigilance against encroachment from the others, charmed to note that already he turned to her with an air of interest. The width of the table, fortunately, made such a division possible, for Henry and Uncle Jobson, with the natural antipathy of one intemperate person for another, could always be relied on to engage each other in squabbling.

Henry's wife preserved her virtue of speechlessness, though her slow glance went from Hetty to Niven at intervals, exercising in secret the detective faculties of women. To Ethel alone she addressed a stray remark, keyed below the sound of other voices.

Robert ate with the air of a man who dines among strangers repugnant to him. It was his habitual manner at the meal table, admitting that mental reservations are thrust on the individualist in any community. The community, unfortunately, is apt to disregard this need for privacy.

'I tell you what, young feller,' said Henry. 'You take my tip and drop knocking round with Arnold and his push.'

'More cauliflower, please,' said Robert hurriedly, but Mrs. Piper's vigilance was not eluded.

'I hope Robert does *not* consort with such people,' she said, with a warning eye on Robert.

'Oh, I only know them to speak to,' said Robert, consigning Henry to the perdition of elder brothers.

'Then you'll kindly cease to know them,' said Mrs. Piper in the undertone of domestic finality.

Robert muttered something at the cauliflower. He also made it clear that his presence at table was mere vulgar necessity by escaping to his room the moment dinner was over and banging the door behind him.

Here, for a period, he occupied himself in scowling. It assisted to concentrate annoyance at that vacuum in time labelled Sunday. By scowling also about the room it was convicted of incompetence to supply a continuum in diversion to bridge that gap of boredom.

The room had done its best, lumbered as it was with past solutions to a vital existence. Stowed away on shelves were a microscope, a galvanic battery, an ex-

perimental array of bottles, a collection of birds' eggs, a stuffed possum, and a hoard of mineral specimens, the lust of enquiry into these matters long since smothered in a pall of dust. Now all proposals to the adventure of intellect were on his book shelves, but the order of its arrangement admitted a certain confliction of spirit. Poetry came first, but science came next; the literary proprieties followed, and fiction came last. Pasted on the wall against his bed, where the eye might feast on them at leisure, were certain portraits admitting a like catholicity in special appreciations, for among them were Byron, Professor Tyndal, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Bradlaugh, Richard Burton, Pope, Professor Huxley, George Gilfillan and Tom Paine.

Above these was hung, in a spirit of religious ecstasy, the coloured lithograph of a Spanish lady; a splendid creature, with parted red lips, a rose between her teeth, glancing with heavy lidded eyes across one shoulder, the masculine ideal of disdainful femininity. Underneath was written in Robert's neatest handwriting:

> All thine the last wine that I pour is,
> The last in the chalice we drain,
> Oh fierce and luxurious Dolores,
> Our Lady of Pain.

Robert sat on the bed and scowled at a universe where there were no fierce and luxurious ladies to spend a Sunday afternoon with. There was nothing whatever to do but sit in a hot back bedroom, listening to a cracked Sunday school bell summoning infants to the imbecility of Scripture lessons.

In a flash he fell into an abyss of despair. He was nineteen, and a day was passing without promise of entertainment. Around him the house blended in a monotonous message of Sunday afternoon. The kitchen

gave out its clink of dishes being washed; the front verandah its ostracising note of social assurances, where Hetty entertained Niven; a loud burring sound, interjected with snorts, announced that Uncle Jobson took a siesta in his bedroom, with a red bandana handkerchief across his red bandana face.

Robert arrived suddenly from despair by remembering his new walking stick, and produced it from under the bed. He had won it in a sixpenny raffle, but it was accounted worth ten shillings. Its handle of silver, designed in the shape of a dog's head, pleased him strangely. Life was again aware of its responsibilities; he would take this stick and go walking with it.

Alert now, but flourishing the stick with discretion, else might jeers from Hetty depreciate a chaste emblem of emancipation, he went round by the garden paths to avoid the verandah. Through the shrubs he noted Niven spread out on the cane lounge, while Hetty sat in the hammock, which thus permitted a better allowance of legs than the skirts of the 'nineties intended. Little flashes of sunlight came through the creepers on her white muslin frock, throwing brilliant reflections upwards with a fine effect on the under curve of her big breasts, her full throat and chin, and the arch of her black eye-brows, drawn like two precise brush strokes. With her bright-eyed appreciation of all masculine perfections she made a summer picture in the hammock that frankly invited mental embraces, which Niven's dawdling glances returned always from the garden to endorse or at least to admit that these were delightful terms on which to idle away an afternoon. His slim, aquiline features and his well-cut clothes were designed for admissions of that sort, which did not necessarily imply over-much responsibility for a discreet

libertinage of glances.

Henry sat on the verandah ledge with his coat off, reading the Wild Cat column of the 'Bulletin'. Conversation on impersonal matters annoyed Henry, who had no topics but his own affairs and their relation to the town's affairs, and these had been put outside a brick wall of novels and music. He stood that to the end of the Wild Cat column, then went off to have a word with his father about the summer buying. He called it a word, but Mr. Piper was kept busy measuring a brass flower-pot, a chair back, and the window sill for an hour later, such was the aberration of mind attending converse with a successful draper.

Ethel, as usual, dawdled on the outskirts of Hetty's operations, frankly effaced by Hetty. She stood aside for Robert to open the gate, he, also, dodging attention from the verandah Olympians.

'The upper classes,' he said, with a satisfactory sneer for Ethel's appreciation, and got his stick off the premises.

Ethel's equanimity forbore to classify social intolerances. Possibly she was unaware of them. She leaned on the gate, vaguely watching Robert out of sight. At the corner he swung his stick briskly and vanished, a gesture of optimism that the sleepy street failed to endorse. A few people were there, loitering away Sunday in their best clothes. The warmth drowsed them and replaced contentment. It kept Ethel pleasantly narcoticised, too, looking at nothing with her light-irised eyes, exotically black-lashed. She seldom raised her eyelids, but when she did those long lashes gave her fleeting glance an effective brilliance. For the rest, we suppose artists were well advised to select little blonde heads, veiled eyes, and untroubled lips as an

easy æsthetic in virginity.

'Tea, infant,' called Hetty an hour later, when the housemaid, by *sub rosa* orders, carried a special tray to the verandah. Ethel sidled out from the shrubs and reached her chair with a slide and a wriggle, which meekly absolved Niven from paying her any attention. Niven murmured a politeness vaguely at this embarrassed little girl and put her at ease again by continuing the conversation with Hetty. Hetty made that easy for him. He forgot to notice what time later a wriggle and a slide got Ethel back to her dawdling about the garden.

III

That evening, while church bells were ringing their summons to the devout, found Robert hanging about the back gate of Cassidy's Hotel. For the benefit of anyone passing he wore a languid air, imposing an understanding that he was there by accident, but the furtive glance he cast at intervals over the hotel gate and the appeal of a short sharp whistle a little depreciated this assumption, and shortly it was disposed of altogether by the appearance of a girl from the hotel.

This was a fat, dough-faced wench of sixteen, with a snub nose, a hoyden's lip, and a dumpy figure that bulged her print dress into unexpected shapes, as though it had been stuffed by a careless upholsterer.

Here were the economics of gaiety in a country town sufficiently commented on, for Robert, with his smooth features, and his air of being the product of a respectable family circle, was there clearly in the character of a desperate mendicant.

'I've been waiting half an hour for you,' he said indignantly. 'Where's your hat?'

'I on'y come out to say I can't come out to-night,' said the girl.

'Why not?'

'I dunno,' said the fat one, vaguely. 'I can't be bothered.'

Robert smothered annoyance at this candour.

'Come on, Rube,' he said. 'Get your hat and come for a stroll round the lake.'

'Go on, I mightn't be safe,' said Ruby playfully. She made a slap at him, in the manner of innocence rebuking sin.

Robert endured this gaiety with policy. He became persuasive, urgent, appealing, and finally peremptory.

'Are you coming out, or are you not?' he demanded.

'I dunno,' said the hoyden.

'Give us an answer, can't you?'

'What yer want me to come for a walk for? Can't you talk here?'

The feeble semblance of gallantry deserted Robert at the suggestion.

'Talk sense, fat face,' said he resentfully. 'I'm not going to hang round here all night. If you won't come out, say so.'

'Well, I won't,' said the fat one, incensed at the epithet. And she added solemnly, 'It don't do a girl's reputation no good, bein' seen out after dark with you, Bob Piper.'

One ekes out the parsimony of gaiety with difficulty on such terms.

'Look here,' said Robert, scowling, 'will you come out to-morrow night?'

'I might,' said the coquette, relapsing into playfulness. A screech from the back premises, translatable to Miss Cassidy, robbed this interview of fulfilment.

'There's Ma callin' me,' said she, and having snatched at Robert's hat as a parting token of light-heartedness, ran off giggling.

Maledictions on these fat hoydens who presume upon our adoration for Madame Life! Robert scowled about the pavement for some moments, furious at this loss of his night's entertainment, but five minutes of that doused his anger and left him stranded in the main street, in the blight of its shuttered shop fronts, its few street lamps, and here and there the dulled pattern of a window with its blinds drawn.

Silence; darkness; the mystery of shadows. That is to say, a depressing lack of noise and movement, and above all, bright lights, with girls walking under them.

Robert turned and dawdled glumly through the peace of evening, with the bats dipping overhead and the mopokes complaining down by the creek. Up the road, down the road, his vigil continued without effect. No girl came walking to an impromptu love affair. At the bridge he paused at length, and leaning on the stone parapet gazed for a long time at the sluggish creek below with that fascination for running water that has its roots in the heart of primordial life.

For a period he gloomed in some sincerity, till the silence, broken only by the ripple of water and the mopoke's call, aroused him to a theatrical consciousness of his mood.

At that he pulled out a pocket-book and began jotting lines in it, with interludes of distracted abstraction. His inspiration, begot of melancholy, carried him to four verses and pumped him dry of misanthropic imagery. It is sufficient that they began,

In the depths of dark sorrow's stagnation
When the soul is in madness entombed

I stand, knowing nought of elation
On the verge of Hell's depths unillumed.

and strangely soothed the gloom of Sunday evening by an explicit announcement that hope was dead.

Still, he hung about the streets for another hour, on the bare chance of meeting a girl. Sometimes one might be detached from the thin trickle of church-goers that melted away into dark houses, whose back windows now began to show dim slits of illumination blankly outlining a ruthless blind. Behind it, girls went as ruthlessly to bed. Incredible! Minxes, slim cats, slatterns and hoydens, beautiful or ugly, but all desirable and all —all unaware that time was going and every moment a love adventure fell down a crack in eternity and was lost for ever.

By half past nine the streets were deserted and the misanthrope went home. There was nothing else to do. He skirted the lighted front windows, entered by the back way, and taking some prunes and macaroons from the supper tray in the kitchen retired to his bedroom.

The expression of dissatisfaction lingered on his face while he lit a candle and ate his prunes and macaroons. That done, he unlocked his desk and took from it a small green book which bore the peculiar title of 'Cries from Fiji.'

But this was subterfuge to defeat the curiosity of a chance discoverer. Its contents were in manuscript, written with a neatness attesting the writer's sense of their importance.

Above the date of Sunday, 1896, the year of his present being, Robert sat down and wrote:

'Church in the morning. Mankletoe preached. After church, home. Dr. Niven to dinner. A skite. After dinner, got out my stick, and went for a walk. At the

Lake met George and Jubber. They had beer down at old Bill's last night. Regret I was not there, as it appears they had fun after, shifting gates, etc. Called for Ruby C. in evening, but she would not come out. Home, 10 o'cl.

Weather. Warm day, lovely night. Smoked during the day four pipes, one Swiss cigar.

N.B. Read Byron in church.

Mem. George tells me he had the ginger-headed slavey from the Royal out Sat. night. Promised to lend him Tom Paine's "Age of Reason".'

Which raises the question, at least, of exactly how much a chronicler may know of the true significance in a day's events.

CHAPTER II

I

ROBERT, with a couple of text books honourably displayed, had gone behind the church to study. The Misanthrope, the Amorist, the Poet, and the Atheist suffered a temporary displacement, for he was lying in the shade, smoking, reading 'Ready Money Mortiboy', and was indeed perfectly happy.

In the kitchen Mrs. Piper was busy with a flour dredger, a rolling pin, and a basin of dough. Whatever her generation lacked in sociological aspirations, it was efficient in these matters.

Uncle Jobson was in the fowlyard. As marking the leisured nature of his business there he wore an old bed gown, deeply tainted with snuff, and on his head one of those graceful coverings known in its period as a smoking cap, a sort of velvet pie-dish, with a long tassel depending from the crown.

Though Uncle Jobson's claims to a relationship were a trifle confused by the fact that he dwelt in the Piper household disguised as a visitor, those claims were doubtless advanced on good authority, for no family in its senses would have selected Uncle Jobson merely as a guest.

He had arrived in that capacity from the north of England five years ago, and though there was kept up a constant fiction of his immediate return, this laudable intention was somewhat discredited by the fact that he had brought with him, as luggage, a bed, an arm-chair, a locked cupboard, two enormous trunks, and no less

than eight bell-toppers, besides an indestructible one for daily use.

For an old gentleman of abnormal parsimony, this extravagance in bell-toppers was inexplicable. He never wore them, and beyond issuing stringent prohibitions against any meddling with them let them remain in their eight leather boxes piled up at the end of the kitchen passage. There was no room for them in his bedroom, already crowded to suffocation by his bed, his boxes, his arm-chair, and his mysterious cupboard, whose mystery was a whisky bottle, consumed in secret with the unholy zest of an avowed teetotaller.

With the tentacles of these effects rooted in the Piper household, Uncle Jobson remained a fixture, his prestige maintained purely as a testamentary speculation. No one knew whether he had any money, and that was where the speculation came in.

Hetty was in the house. It was her morning charge to oversee the housemaid, and she went about this business in a pair of washleather gloves, her hair tied up against the dust.

Ethel dawdled about the verandah. Like Grandpa Piper, she was less a member of the household than a presence, immune from the vulgar activities of those about her.

Grandpa Piper himself was in the dining-room. He was engaged in standing between the sideboard and the sofa. This is as far as one might go in a definite statement of Grandpa Piper's occupation. An assumption that he was lurking between the sofa and the sideboard for some secret purpose would remain unconfirmed. Odd corners appeared to exercise a peculiar attraction for the ancient, and he might be discovered at any time stowed away behind doors, or in those embrasures made

by clothes-presses, wardrobes, or hall stands, always motionless, always abstracted, always intensely resigned.

While Grandpa Piper was engaged in standing, Mr. Piper, with an expression of exasperation, was peering at him through the door jamb. At intervals he varied this secret scrutiny by violently measuring the door. His final entrance, in the character of one who arrives to unexpectedly discover a parent on the premises, was feeble in the extreme.

'You here, Grandfather,' he said. In households of the third generation Grandfather is a courtesy title, indifferent to relationship.

Grandpa Piper betrayed no evidence of being aware of his son's presence. He looked at Mr. Piper, certainly, but that was no evidence that he saw him. The effect of his sheeplike stare caused Mr. Piper to renounce diplomacy in a sort of fury.

'Will you go into the accounts now?' he shouted. This time Grandpa Piper was clearly aware of some faint disturbance in his vicinity. He began a shuffling process, which carried him round the edge of the sideboard in the direction of the door.

Mr. Piper arrested him with a handful of documents.

'I've got them here,' he shouted, thrusting them upon the ancient perforce.

Grandpa Piper stared at the papers, unable to account for this extraordinary behaviour in a son. Some evidence of being vaguely aware that they had to do with a disturbance in the atmosphere caused him finally to take them in his hand.

'Eighteen pound ten will cover it,' shouted Mr. Piper.

Grandpa Piper nodded vaguely, benignly, resignedly.

'Quite so, Alexander, quite so,' he murmured, and in

a soothing cadence of 'Quite so, quite so, quite so' got himself to the door and disappeared.

Mr. Piper, left alone, made a plunge at the mantelpiece and measured it in a transport. It argued an enduring quality of optimism underlying his habitual air of depression that such interviews with his parent always reduced him to an extravagant state of emotion, for this scene was strictly in keeping with the normal routine of Monday morning in the Piper household.

Behind it lay the peculiar economics of the Piper family, whose genesis was Grandpa Piper and the drapery trade.

Long ago Grandpa Piper had come to the township of Redheap and set up a small drapery store. In those days Redheap was one of those eruptions of human lunacy called a mining centre. Its population of muscular adventurers spread themselves over the earth like feverish ants, tearing at it, piling it up in heaps, burrowing in its depths, and slashing its grey-brown surface with great scars of mullock and gravel, thrown up from the beds of buried rivers.

In the tide of that furious activity Grandpa Piper, like a species of industrious miner himself, had dug his way along the main street, till no less than seven assorted shop fronts bore the name of Piper & Co.

And therein was constituted and maintained the Piper family grievance, for nothing would induce Grandpa Piper to change this legend to Piper and Son.

For the finances of a mining township, like a gambler's fortune, depend upon the vagaries of luck. With the petering out of its gold the township's prosperity had suddenly dwindled, like a madman's energy, too furious to last.

With the town's diminished fortunes the Piper

establishment had shrunk to three shop fronts. These still maintained the family comfortably enough, save for the knowledge that this structural prosperity hung on the thread of Grandpa Piper's mortality. Though the ancient's chosen attitude to most things was one of resignation, he showed a decided reluctance to resigning his hold on the business. What was equally discomforting, his powers of resignation failed him equally when it came to parting with money. The tenacity with which he kept his clutches on the business, and the secrecy with which he kept his banking account, had done their work in thrusting upon Alexander Piper the depressed expression of a man of uncertain income. He had gone into the shop, very much as Crown Princes go in for becoming Kings, because he was the eldest son. But the succession remained unconfirmed. He had married, produced children, and muddled along into middle age on no better financial security than being in the shop. Like a great many fathers of vital families he was a man of sapped vitality, and altogether lacked the ability, or the rapacity, to trounce his parent into a reasonable frame of mind.

Seventy years' practice in the art of resignation had given Grandpa Piper an immense advantage in these conflicts. As a quality natural to the infirmity of deafness, he had the greatest difficulty in hearing demands for money. When such were made, he could surround himself with an impenetrable denseness, through which communication was about as practicable as shouting at a man under water.

Passive as a sheep, he allowed Alexander to exhaust his vocal chords without effect. There might presently result a cheque, or there might result nothing. It was like buying a ticket in a sweep, and measuring the fire-

place, however violently, was no solution to its unsatisfactory nature.

'It's no use,' said Mr. Piper through the kitchen door, 'I've given him those accounts, and he's gone off with them, and there's an end of it.'

'Are you sure, Alexander, that you were firm with your father?' said Mrs. Piper.

Mr. Piper put aside that aspect of his negotiations with a testy gesture.

'You'll have to ask him for that money yourself' he said, and fled to the shop. Here at least he had the benefit of a master mind on the subject of Grandpa Piper's vacillations.

'I suppose you know he hasn't settled this quarter's accounts yet,' said Henry, as his father entered the little glassed-off partition in the central shop, where the books were kept.

Mr. Piper knew that, and wished to forget it.

'I tell you what,' said Henry. 'He's hanging back to make an excuse of going to town for the spring buying, and it won't do. It *won't do*.' Henry banged the desk. He had the florid peculiarity of suddenly swelling and reddening under the stimulus of anger. 'We can do our sorting up lines from the travellers, but the November deliveries aren't in hand yet, and if that old screw's going off like he did last year to spend a couple of months on the loose we'll be in the devil's own fix.'

'I know, I know,' said Mr. Piper, measuring his own head.

'We'll have to stop him, that's what,' said the master mind. 'They'll have to keep an eye on him at home. We can't stop him from muddling about in here, of course, but we can put an end to his capers in town, and

that's the long and the short of it.'

Henry had long ago made up his mind that since Grandpa Piper insisted on remaining outside his coffin he might at least have the grace to keep out of the shop as well. His objection to the ancient's presence there was based on the sound business principle that customers object to a deficit in their change, and even the most unprejudiced compunction could hardly credit the frequency of such shortages to this good old man's abstraction from earthly affairs.

'Time the old blighter was put on the shelf,' said Henry, scowling. 'Can't understand why you don't have it out with him—once and for all.'

Mr. Piper nearly measured Henry. Arrested at that, he seemed about to measure the door, and by that means got himself through it.

'And that's *you*,' said Henry scornfully at his departed parent. 'But if I had *my* way——'

He brooded darkly.

II

Still pursuing the formal routine of these matters, Mrs. Piper put her head in at Robert's door after tea and said graciously:

'You will stay at home to-night, Robert?'

'Why?' demanded Robert suspiciously.

'Because I wish it, dear,' said Mrs. Piper. Her manner was smooth, conciliatory, just. It appeared to insist, only as an afterthought. Yet for some reason this manner was not a success with Robert.

'Where's the harm of going for a stroll?' he demanded.

'It's not a question of harm, dear,' said Mrs. Piper. 'Your home is the proper place for you at night.'

'Oh, all right,' said Robert sullenly, and picked up a book in order to throw it down again.

Mrs. Piper lingered for a moment doubtfully, and with a sigh of self-pity for a misunderstood mother went away.

Robert cast some more books on the floor, as a token of annoyance designed to reach his mother's ears. He had had no particular intention of going out, so this expression of a just indignation was quite gratuitous. Having arrived at it, a grievance was constituted, and that demanded an audience. He got up and slouched into the passage, as a means of announcing to the family its responsibility for his state of mind. As the family refused to discover him in this martyred seclusion, he was forced to slouch at intervals past the dining-room door. It was an evidence of family callousness that these spectral appearances failed to disturb its equanimity.

They gathered in the dining-room by custom after tea, save when the presence of a visitor demanded lights in the drawing-room. Mrs. Piper darned socks there, Peter did his home lessons, and Mr. Piper sat in an arm-chair and played with the newspaper. If Mr. Piper had any pleasure in life it was this peculiar form of evening relaxation. He did not so much read the paper as make a formal pretence of being about to read it. It was his habit to place the sheets together with great nicety, fold them carefully, and light his pipe. That done, he unfolded the paper, refolded it, and flattened it out with great precision. His pipe having gone out, he relit it, unfolded the paper, vigorously flattened out the creases, and folded it up again.

As a special relaxation, he reached out and measured

the fireplace at intervals, rapidly counting up to five in a low voice, before returning refreshed to fold, unfold, refold, and do everything else possible to a newspaper except read it.

Removed from the immediate radius of the shaded light stood Grandpa Piper, in a species of trance. Having stood most of his life behind the counter he was inured to the upright posture, and seemed to doze resignedly upon his feet.

Upon this peaceful scene the Misanthrope in the passage cast at intervals the accusation of his gaze.

This was home, it seemed. To this pass they came who renounced the poor resource of meeting a friend or two in the streets at night, or of going in pursuit of publicans' daughters.

Robert slouched to the other end of the passage and looked in at Ethel's open door. She was scribbling in a letter pad, seated at her bedroom window that looked into the garden. Her page finished, she turned it over and glanced at Robert.

'Want anything?' she asked.

'No,' said the Misanthrope.

Having thus discouraged in himself a desire for further communication he went away.

A further interval of slouching found him looking in at the kitchen door. The housemaid, a pale subdued looking girl, with intensely black eyes, was making up the supper tray, paying no attention to old Bridget the cook, who stood by uttering a querulous monologue that had some reference to a presence in the wash-house, a snorting, grunting presence, apparently rooting in the dust-bin.

Old Bridget, a little dumpy old woman, the shape of an upended bolster, with her elbows stuck out like the

wings of a plucked fowl, and the long dolorous nose of a turned-down pot handle, nodded a trembling malediction at those sounds.

'An' me swep' the place three times this day, sez you, an' the morrow's kindlin' wood wet to the bone with mixin' his fowls' food on it, an' no room to twist or turn an' the day's washin' to get done, an' him in an' out morning, noon and night, let alone takin' up the stove with his fowls' bucket, where it stands this minit, sez you, so give notice I will, sez I, this day week——'

A vague speculation tinged the Misanthrope's regard as he watched the housemaid cut sandwiches for supper. She was slim, but with a sort of secret robustness under her close-fitting black dress that went strangely with the bloodless pallor of her skin. Yet there was an undeniable attraction in her darkly pigmented eyes, and anyway, she was a girl, and her bedroom was two doors away from Robert's, and that fact alone had often caused him agitated interludes of speculation in the blessed area of hope, in spite of confirmed evidence that the wench was afflicted with religion and unapproachably austere.

'What sort of sandwiches are those, Maggie?' enquired Robert, with an assumption of interest in sandwiches.

'Potted meat, Master Robert,' said the housemaid, with an uncompromising lack of interest in Master Robert.

The Misanthrope was presently back at the dark end of the passage, a gleam of possible entertainment extinguished in his darkened soul.

The jingling of the supper tray brought Uncle Jobson hastening from those mysterious labours in the wash-house. As a prelude to some vigorous conversa-

tion he placed his spectacles, his handkerchief, and his snuff box on the table, and seated himself well in Mr. Piper's light, watching the housemaid with marked severity till she had left the room. Her departure assured, he snuffed vigorously.

'I snuff for the heid's sake' was his formula for this indulgence. 'I find it clarifies the heid.'

Having gratified himself in this clarifying, if obsolete, practice, he demanded Mrs. Piper's attention on a matter of state.

'I've been takin' the measure of yon wench ye have in the kitchen,' said he. 'An' ye'll mark my opeenion, I hope, when I say ye'd be well rid of her.'

'Why, Uncle?' protested Mrs. Piper. 'She's an excellent maid—so quiet and well-behaved. I haven't had a better girl for years.'

'Ay,' said Uncle Jobson ironically. 'I hear ye say so. Have ye seen what she does with the potatee peelin's? Ye have not. Have ye seen where the plate scrapin's goes to? Have ye seen,' said Uncle Jobson with basilisk severity, 'what's come of the heel of to-day's loaf?'

Mrs. Piper signifying a strange ignorance on this matter, Uncle Jobson produced an object suddenly from the pocket of his bed-gown, which he thrust under Mrs. Piper's nose.

'Will ye tell me what that is?' he demanded.

Mrs. Piper, with the air of one answering a conundrum, suggested the heel of to-day's loaf.

'Ye happen to be right,' said the inquisitor severely. 'But will ye kindly say where it was I found it?'

This riddle being quite beyond Mrs. Piper, Uncle Jobson laughed vauntingly.

'Ye don't know,' he said. 'An' ye'll never guess. Where was it I found it, then, where on earth was it?'

said Uncle Jobson, hammering on the table to stimulate amazement at this disclosure, 'but in the dust-bin, along with the potatee peelin's and the plate scrapin's. Good fowls' food deleeberately thrown away, and the bucket standin' there night an' day for the scrapin's. Ye'll hear me out,' he added peremptorily, and took a pinch of snuff. 'Puttin' aside yon wench's habit o' leavin' the tea-caddy open, which is fair ruin to good tea, what is it I find in the sink this evenin'? What is it I find?' said Uncle Jobson with a glare of preternatural severity, 'but the soap left in the wash-up watter.'

'Perhaps old Bridget——' began Mrs. Piper, but Uncle Jobson refused to hear any extenuation of these serious offences.

'Old Bridget is an idiot, I grant ye, but no a waster o' good food an' soap,' he said. ''Tis the wench is at the bottom o' these destructive habits, an' I think ye'll take my advice an' rin her off the premises.'

Grandfather Piper, like an aged seer, removed from such earthly considerations as the habits of kitchen maids, abstractedly picked up Uncle Jobson's snuff box and without the slightest evidence of any emotion whatever, threw it out of the window.

Uncle Jobson failed to observe this wanton act, but Mrs. Piper saw it, too amazed by its deliberation to offer a protest.

'Dear me, Grandpa,' she said at length, 'whatever made you do that?'

Uncle Jobson, with a generous wave of the hand, absolved her from concern over Grandpa Piper's antics.

'Take no notice of yon dodderer whatever,' he said.

'But Uncle——'

'Sit ye down, I'm sayin',' said Uncle Jobson testily. 'I haven't finished the half of what I have to say about

yon wench——'

Mrs. Piper arrested these protests with a severe expression.

'I only wished to tell you', she said warningly, 'that he's thrown your snuff box out of the window.'

Uncle Jobson paused only to verify this sacrilege before starting up in a frenzy.

'Gie's a light,' he roared and plunged out of the room. In no time he had harried old Bridget, the housemaid, and Mrs. Piper into the garden with candles to search for the snuff box, while he himself ranted about the footpaths and Grandpa Piper peered from the dining-room window, wholly unable to account for so extraordinary a disturbance.

The Misanthrope, obliterated by this trivial uproar, gloomily collared a cup of coffee and a sandwich and retired to bed.

Being then reduced to extreme lowness of spirits, for which even the essays of George Gilfillan were no antidote, he propped an exercise book on his knees and sought an afflicted consolation in some verses beginning :

> Better the red blast of madness,
> Of Passions we scorn to control,
> Than clouds of dark sorrow and sadness,
> Engulphing all pleasure and gladness,
> Entombing the soul.

They have a lot to answer for, these elders who insist that home is the proper place for us at night.

CHAPTER III

'ROBERT,' said Mrs. Piper, 'you are not going out to-night, dear.'

This scene has already been rehearsed. . . .

But there are bounds to a man's appetite for misanthropy and the dark end of passages, and giving his mother time to settle herself in the dining-room, Robert slid out of the window and sped away to the chemist's shop, as a man makes for his club.

This was the informal meeting-place of his set, for here were the chemist's pile of shutters to sit on, and here was the cheerful effect of the chemist's lights, filtered through those coloured globes that are the mystic emblem of the chemist's calling.

At present the club was rather empty, the only occupant of the shutters being a youth of serious aspect, with a round bowler hat on a round solemn face, who seemed to sit forlornly in that quiet street, a youthful Micawber, waiting for something to turn up.

At the sight of Robert he betrayed a genuine emotion of pleasure. His name, on the authority of Robert's greeting, was George; and Robert, having met him no longer ago than yesterday, was equally ingenuous in expressing his pleasure at meeting him again to-day. Instantly, with a masonic flourish, they produced pipes, and with the care of a beloved ritual began to cut up tobacco. Their faces, in the glow of light from the chemist's windows, betrayed a solemn gusto, now that they were about to smoke and talk. There were important things to talk about, for George, it seemed, had

lately been awakened to that religious condition of mind that marks the earnest young atheist.

'That's a great book, that Tom Paine's "Age of Reason",' he said. 'My ghost, it makes a chap think.'

'It's pure logic,' said Robert.

George scratched his head, as an evidence that the age of reason was at work there.

'Now these parsons', he said, 'regard logic with contempt.'

'What d'you expect?' said Robert. 'Logic's the natural enemy of Religion. Take Science, for instance.'

'Take old Prodgers as another instance,' said George. 'He regards dancing as a sin. Now what I say is,' said George, laboriously getting the logical process into working order, 'dancing isn't a sin. It's what happens *after* the dance is where the sin comes in.'

Robert was much struck with this profundity, which George proceeded to exemplify.

'Take the case,' he said. 'Here's me, on and off, chasin' Maggie Trimble for a year; no more hope of gettin' it than flyin'. Takes her to the Firemen's Annual, dances her to a standstill; gets her outside for a cool off and in ten minutes, you might say, has her spreadeagled.'

'You've hit it,' said Robert. 'Now, if you'd gone on dancing, you might never have got her.'

'Take smoking, now,' went on the exponent of pure logic. 'These parsons regard smoking as a sin. Now what I say is, smoking excites the brain.'

'All the greatest thinkers agree that tobacco stimulates the brain,' said Robert.

'My contention exactly,' said George. 'Old Prodgers sez to me—I was smoking up at the station—"Take that filthy pipe outer your mouth," he sez. "You call

smoking a sin," I sez. "I call it a dirty habit," he sez. "What about the Rev. Brindle?" I sez. "He smokes for the asthma," sez he. "An' I smoke to excite the brain," I sez. Which of us is the better man?'

These subtleties were interrupted by another member of the club, who came across from the library. This pilgrim on the road to emancipation was an overgrown blob of a youth, with a round fat face like a hastily designed pudding, a youth who had acquired with indecent haste the corpulency of middle-age. They greeted him as Jubber, and he discovered himself at once to be a noisy garrulous creature, whose mentality had failed to keep pace with his presumptuous flesh. The only undersized thing about him was his brain, which seemed to rattle in his empty head like a pebble in a tin can.

'I'm off the pipe these days,' he said, producing a cigar with a flourish. 'Bought a box of fifty Rhinegolds at a bob a time.'

'Fifty stinkerdorers at a bob a hundred, you mean,' said George, austerely.

'Talking of Prodgers,' said Robert, 'I see the new parson's come to take his place. Saw his daughter in church Sunday.'

Atheism was a trifle depreciated at this piece of information.

'Any good?' enquired George with interest.

'Not a bad-looking wench at all,' said Robert tolerantly. 'Very good chest development. But mind you, I like 'em on the fat side.'

'Same here,' said George. 'Give me something I can get me arm round. Give me', said George with gusto, 'plenty o' beef.'

Jubber, who had been temporarily silenced by a

fruitless effort to extract smoke from his priceless cigar, gave over his labours to let out some gabble instead.

'Talk o' Prodgers,' he said. 'He's onter me for boozin'. Sees me comin' out o' Cassidy's full as a tick. Eighteen long uns I had. Sober as a judge. Laugh! I did laugh!'

The fact that most of Jubber's anecdotes terminated in mere vacancy did not appear to concern Jubber, to whom talk, not sense, was the end in view.

'Talk about walking, though,' he went on, as a subject particularly removed from present consideration. 'You oughter been with us Friday. "Walk yer to Ballarat for a quid," I sez to Andy West. "Done," sez he. First twenty minutes I had him blown. Done the twelve mile in one thirty-five an' a half. He comes in half an hour late absolutely dead to the world. Me—fresh as paint. We done the quid in on beer. On an' off I suppose I had thirty long-uns. Peculiar thing about me, beer has absolutely no effect on me. Remember that day out at Foley's? There's me drinkin' perhaps forty long-uns on end, an' plays a game of billiards after—steady as a rock.'

'Remember that day out at Foley's?' said George tolerantly. 'I should laugh! Remember how we had to carry this stinkin' skite home after four beers?'

'That's the peculiar thing about Jubber,' said Robert, 'beer makes him drunk.'

Jubber, it is clear, is no social problem at the chemist's shutters. Nor is badinage, it is equally clear, effective in quelling Jubber. In the character of Fortune's favourite, he took out half-a-crown and spun it in the air.

'What about a bob in down at old Bill's an' the winner shouts?' he said.

George, the product of mean parents, was forced to admit the calculations of insolvency at this prospect.

'You lend me sixpence,' he said to Robert, 'and that'll make one and thruppence I owe you till Saturday.'

Robert was able to make good the deficiency and they set off with holiday alacrity round the Town Hall corner, making for the bridge that spanned the creek, beyond which lay the bowling green and tennis court. They sang as they went, because they were about to purchase beer with money, and that is what money is for.

The bowling green, surrounded by tall trees and well-kept hedges, owned a small wooden Club-House, to which was attached the residence of its aged custodian. From the window of this hermitage gleamed a light, and from within came the sound of a croaking voice, which might have issued from an ancient bull frog stirred to anger.

The visitors pushed open the door into a smell of onions, tobacco and old age. In this retreat, which contained a bed, a chair or two, some pots and pans, and two antique lithographs designed to represent that creature once known as 'Lovely Woman', were three people—two youths and an old man, all clearly at the point of some intellectual crisis.

The ancient bullfrog, who was a stumpy little old man composed of a hat, a beard, and a pair of dreadnought trousers, was presented in an attitude of passionate assertion.

'Trew ter Gord may He blind me eternally, I see her I tell yew, lyin' dead on the floor,' he vociferated, trembling rheumatically in the desire to carry conviction.

'Red-hot, ain't it?' said the taller of the two youths, imparting to that comment an assumption of mild wonder. He was a lanky, shambling creature, of a

frankly disreputable appearance, and the expression of his loose underlip and round staring blue eyes was one of fixed innocence, the natural mask of a comedian. The other young man, stretched on Bill's bed, gave a short laugh at the ceiling.

'Old Bill's been at the Club whisky, if you ask me,' he said.

'Oh, Hell! Oh, Gord!' croaked the ancient. 'Ain't I tellin' yew I'm lyin' along here sufferin' these here rewmatics?'

'What's up?' demanded Robert, seeking enlightenment from the tall youth.

'Accordin' to old Bill,' said that worthy, 'there's been a murder committed here last night.'

'Trew as I'm standin' here this minit. Oh Hell, see me!' ejaculated old Bill.

'Murder be sugared,' exclaimed Robert.

'See me. Oh Hell!' exclaimed old Bill. Any effort to comply with this urgent request was somewhat negatived by Bill's hat, which was an immense structure, high in the crown, broad in the brim, and lined with green, a colour understood to convey a tonic coolness to the brain. Owing to the dimensions of this fine hat, one's first impression of old Bill was merely of a long dank beard suspended from the interior of his hat, but permitted by the intimacy of friendship to peer beneath the brim one discovered sprouting in this beard a pointed, carnal nose, red and moist, and above it a pair of watery old eyes—one partly screwed up, and the other gleaming with the effect of supernatural alertness. The rest of Bill was stowed away anyhow in his trousers, which terminated in a pair of carpet slippers, the blessed dispensation of bowling greens, for no boots could have contained his bursting corns and bunions.

'What I can't make out,' said the tall youth, with an aloofness from prejudice clearly designed to annoy old Bill, 'if there's been a murder, what's become of the corpse?'

'Oh, Hell! Jim Pincher,' exclaimed old Bill. 'Ain't I been tellin' you what's happen her corp?' Rheumatically anchored by his tender feet he apostrophised the new-comers in the hope of carrying conviction.

"Bout midnight larst night I'm lying in bed along here, bad with rheumatics. Outside, hears voices. "Gord strike me," sez I, "what's voices doin' here outside old Bill's this time o' night? B'lieve me, or b'lieve me not, one o' these voices is a woman's. T'other's a man," sez I, lying' along here like a blinded cripple.'

'Blind drunk, you mean,' said the youth on the bed.

Old Bill directed a stream of blasphemy at this interjector, who appeared to arouse him to a special malevolence. But George's curiosity was excited by this mysterious conjunction of voices outside Bill's cottage at midnight, and he craved for details.

'Go on, Bill,' he said. 'What happened then?'

'Ain't I tellin' yew what happened?' croaked the ancient. 'Ain't I tellin' yew I hears voices plain's me speaking here this minit? "Take me gold," says she, "but spare me life." "Damme," sez he, "I'll cut yer throat." "Help!" sez she. "No help here," sez he. "Murder!" sez she. Gord help me!' ejaculated old Bill, removing his hat for a moment to wipe his brow at the horror inspired by this recital. 'I never in my life hear sich screams's she give while this feller's dewing his best tew murder her.'

'But how'd you know he's tryin' to murder her?' demanded George.

'How dew I know?' exclaimed old Bill with tragic

drama. 'First thing I know—Bang! Crash! Door's knocked in—something heavy takes me crost chest, knocks wind outer me. "Gord help me," sez I, "Bill's done for." '

'What happened then?'

'What then? Nothin'. Not a sound, not a word. "Damme," sez I, "where's matches?" Got a box alongside me here on chair, strikes a light. "Oh, Hell!" sez I, "what's this?" ' ejaculated old Bill, enacting such horror as his tender feet permitted. 'Young woman lies along here, throat cut, bleedin' like a pig.'

Expressions of incredulity greeted this disclosure, only partially sincere from the new-comers.

'I don't believe a dam' word of it,' said the youth on the bed, in a tone that supposed old Bill's feelings not to be concerned.

'Yew don't b'lieve me yew Arnold, damme,' exclaimed the exasperated ancient. 'Yew don't b'lieve my eyes seen her stretched out along here a bloody corp?'

He tore off his hat in a fury and showed on the top of his bald head a considerable abrasion.

'Yew don't b'lieve me?' he shouted. 'What in Hell yew call that?'

'How'd you get that?' enquired George, deeply interested.

'How'd I get that, blarst me?' croaked old Bill bitterly. 'How'm I goin' about in mornin' tellin' here's a bloody corp left dead in my room?' "Must shift this here," sez I, "afore police sees her. Must shift this," sez I, "intew the creek." O Hell!' exclaimed Bill, at the memory of Herculean labours. 'Liftin' that corp nigh broke my back! "Gord help me," sez I, "however will I dew it?" '

'Yes, but how'd you get that clip over the nut?' en-

quired the fascinated George.

'While I'm liftin' that blinded corp,' said Bill, resuming his tale of horror, 'gettin' her threw the door, blarst me if some'un don't fetch me that wipe on the head, knocked me spraddlin'; when I come to, ain't no sign o' corp here nor what there is this minit. Gord blind me eternally if I slep' a wink orl night seein' her lie along here, throat cut like a pig.'

'Pretty hot, ain't it?' said Pincher, staring round the company with his air of mild amazement. 'Mind you,' he added, 'I don't disbelieve old Bill, far from it. My belief is that he had the horrors without knowin' it.'

'My belief is that it's time they took old Bill to the nut-house,' said Arnold, getting off the bed. 'When an old man of Bill's age takes to seeing corpses, his number's up, in my opinion.'

He gave the ancient a friendly push, which caused him to creak all over and erupt into frenzy, while his efforts to reach Arnold with a fist like a bunch of carrots recoiled upon his spellbound bunions with terrible effect.

All enjoyed the exhibition, garnished as it was with old Bill's oaths, for which his company was much esteemed. But Pincher, shuffling the cards, recalled a more urgent diversion.

'Come on,' he cried, 'what is it—a bob in, or is anyone going to shout?'

Old Bill was left to swallow his frenzy in a fit of the sulks while the cards were dealt to adjudge the provider of beer, for which holy emancipator George and Jubber went forth to the Royal Hotel. They returned with it in a demijohn.

The formula was simple that found the occasion now made perfect. They played cards, smoked, drank, sang,

and were uplifted.

To Robert, this was Life transfigured. There was not a doubt in his universe. Happiness was as concrete as a beer bottle—common catch words turned to priceless wit, singing to an earth-effacing boisterousness; friendship—a holy transport.

Even old Bill became rheumatically enlivened, and croaked up a song or two. As an ancient sailor, pickled in the folk-lore of many fo'castles, his version of the 'Maid of Amsterdam' and 'Abreeham the Sailor' were highly prized and written down in pocket-books.

George at intervals engaged the ancient in cross-examination over the alleged midnight murder. He was disturbed to get what he called 'the strength' of that mysterious affair.

'Can't make header tail of it,' he kept repeating owlishly.

There was disunion at the party's breaking up, for eggs were found in Jubber's pocket, and since no man, however full of emancipatory beer, makes an omelet in his pocket of eggs, tobacco and matches, there was some excuse for Jubber's refusal to accept Pincher's innocent condolence over this vile trick.

Old Bill, as the owner of the eggs, had a word to say in the matter too, and saw them off the premises in a rheumatic passion.

They straggled up the road, boisterously amused at Jubber's complaints over the condition of his pocket.

'Aller same,' said George seriously, 'dash funny thing, murder old Bill's.'

Arnold and Pincher laughed subtly, as men congratulated on a successful piece of business.

'I bet you'd a thought it a dashed sight funnier if you'd been there,' said Pincher. 'Laugh! Yer oughter

heard old Bill sittin' up in the dark singin' out, "O Gord, dead in me room!" '

'It was you two,' said George, deeply disappointed. From this insult to his credulity he emerged with an air of lofty censure.

'Go too far,' he said solemnly. 'Heard a feller frighten' t' death, tricks like that.'

'Get out,' said Arnold derisively. 'You couldn't frighten old Bill to death. He's half dead already.'

'Aller same,' said the moralist, 'I call it playin' firearms.'

Arnold heard this censure with composure.

'What about ringing the fire-bell?' he suggested.

George and Robert betrayed some reluctance at this proposal, but Jubber, forgiving the egg episode, exhibited a fine recklessness.

'Jus' a thing,' he said boisterously. 'Be a sport. Sorter man I am. Ring every blarsed fire-bell in town.'

Arnold and Pincher, experts in this species of midnight foolery, pulled back the heavy sliding doors of the fire-brigade building. George and Robert followed them into the dark enclosure, committed to the adventure with a pleasurable thrill of excitement and alarm.

'Don't rush it,' said Robert. 'Wait till we're all ready.'

A muzzy sense of discretion inspired this utterance, for once the doors were illegally barred from within, the only exit was by a seven-foot drop from a small window at the back into old Sandy White's garden, and from thence over several fences at the imminent risk of capture.

Jubber the reckless, at the last moment, was found mysteriously non-existent. He had been, and now was not. Stumbling about in the dark among reels and

hoses Robert cursed this poltroon, whose wisdom he secretly commended.

'No hurry, chaps,' he kept repeating, concerned to find the back window. He could hear the others making their arrangements in the dark; stealthy movements, whisperings, and the creak of boards. This interlude, pregnant with expectation, was suddenly split by the brazen clamour of the bell, a clanging uproar that ripped the silence to tatters, sending a pandemonium of alarm across the township.

The ordeal of this racket was too much for the nerves of George and Robert. They found the back window together and fell as one being into Sandy White's back garden. But they were up and over the fence with the celerity of cats and ran to the creek pursued by the clanging of the bell, absurdly appealing to law and order to avenge this outrage on the peace of night.

'Lissen to the dam' fools!' said Robert, enraged. 'Why the blazes don't they chuck it?'

'They'll get copped!' said George with satisfaction. 'Serve 'em right. Fools!'

The bell ceased suddenly, and the night was filled with the sound of voices, running feet, and a thunderous hammering at the Fire Brigade's door.

The neighbourhood, stirred up like a nest of bull ants, was hasting to avenge this imposition on its credulity. The unwisdom of lingering in that vicinity aroused in Robert a belated sense of caution.

'Less get home,' he said, and got off with a stagger. They went round by the willows that bordered the creek, up Dinny's Lane, and parted at the Triangle. Now that the stimulus of excitement was gone they felt suddenly used-up, like people who have endured great exertions.

Robert completed the journey home in a state of somnambulism, leaving volition to the doubtful authority of his legs, which carried him perversely into the gutter and up against fences without compunction.

At the front gate he exhibited an elementary sense of caution by holding the latch to prevent it clicking and walking on the flower beds, precautions a little disconcerted by the discovery of his mother standing on the verandah in her dressing gown.

'Robert,' she said sharply, 'is that you?'

At the imminence of exposure Robert had a drunkard's inspiration.

'Been out to see a fire-bell,' he said. ''Sno fire,' and passed on austerely into the house.

His mother stared after him doubtfully. She lacked experience to account for such an unnatural dignity of carriage.

CHAPTER IV

I

ROBERT sat at his bedroom table, before the window, that looked out on the church paddock, the neutral playground of two generations of Piper children.

It was late afternoon, and the sun shone through the church palings like fire through a gridiron. Before Robert lay that work which he supposed to be the secret chronicle of his existence, in which he was writing with the precise, school-made hand of youth.

'Had seven beers. Went grand. Going home rang the fire-bell. Great sport. Home, two-thirty. The mater on the verandah, caught me in the act of entering. Told her I was out on account of hearing the fire-bell. As I was dead sober, she suspected nothing. Smoked during the evening——'

Computing the important item of pipefuls, without which no record of his day was perfect, he caught the flutter of dresses in the cape-broom at the far end of the churchyard. A cautious inspection discovered Ethel, talking to the new parson's daughter. In other words, here was a girl within Robert's immediate line of vision. He became agitated at once, darted to the mirror, brushed his hair, darted to the window, peered, hesitated, cleaned his nails, and finally snatching up a book, ran out at the front gate in a state of emotion outside all reasonable expectation in this encounter.

Lurking behind the church, in order to assume an air of intense self-consciousness, as the effect of an effort to appear unconscious, he strolled out, presenting the appearance, as it were, of one reading in a text-book.

This impersonation might have been more successful if Ethel had not been present as its audience. Under her intelligent scrutiny he committed the error of going red about the ears.

'Hallo,' he said to Ethel.

'Hallo,' said Ethel cynically.

Robert paused and glanced furtively at the parson's daughter. The parson's daughter glanced furtively at Robert. Unfortunately Ethel's presence robbed these glances of currency. The setting sun, which paints all things the colour of gold, added an opulent touch to the parson's daughter.

Robert's vision, entranced with the desirability of girls, found her at close quarters larger, more vital, and of a charmingly tinted flesh. Less optimistically observed, she was a short, broad-shouldered girl, built like a sturdy pony, with fine eyes and a lax, inviting mouth.

With that exchange of glances the incident terminated. Robert nodded to Ethel, passed on, and climbed through his bedroom window. In that safe retreat he threw his pillow on the floor and kicked it. If we make a mess of these little affairs something must be made to pay for it.

This incident is adduced as an evidence of the unsatisfactory condition of being nineteen years of age.

It disturbed Robert for the rest of the evening. Like a virus, it set up in his blood a desire to prowl. He loitered into the drawing-room after tea, where Hetty, in a summer evening toilet which made the most of her full throat and dazzling white shoulders, was fitting pink shades to the piano candles.

The drawing-room was Hetty's property. Upon it she had set the seal of the family's gentility and taste.

It was decorated in that skittish æstheticism which

succeeded the mid-Victorian era of horsehair and red rep curtains, and the sensation it inspired was of a bric-à-brac shop carrying on business in a boudoir. One entered it in mortal fear of upsetting an overloaded table at every step. Pot-plants on spindle-legged stands lurked in wait for an incautious gesture. Every surface bristled with an appalling opulence of vases, ornaments, and photos in gilt frames. Pink curtains tied in formal shapes, with silk bows, bedizened the windows, and the walls were not so much decorated as dabbed over with brackets, plaques, Japanese fans, Japanese panels, Japanese masks, and Japanese screens.

At that period the western æsthete, by letters patent, had imposed the Japanese cheap-jack on western lack of taste, and culture could go no further than a black screen with gold storks upon it, or a tormented pattern in birds and bulrushes.

Robert entered this temple of gentility and sneered at the pink candle shades.

'Niven's coming, I bet,' he said.

'Possibly,' remarked Hetty.

'Blooming skite,' appended Robert.

'Oh, run away and play,' said Hetty, barely tolerating this admitted nuisance in the family. Robert retired, expressing contempt for drawing-rooms by slouching with his feet. On the verandah he exhibited the perversity of his restless mood to the placid evening sky. His mother had just finished watering the garden, and the fragrance of flowers and wet earth filled the air. A cricket sang gratefully under the lilac bushes, and a warning hum of mosquitoes menaced the ears. From the kitchen the clatter of crockery being washed greeted the fall of evening, and Uncle Jobson raised his voice in the back garden, misdirecting some zeal, it would

appear, on the subject of potatoes.

'Man,' he could be heard ranting at Higgins, 'the potatoes is no a climbin' plant. This hillin' them is pure rubbish. Keep the soil loose to permit the capillary attraction of the air, ye doighted fule.'

Robert assimilated these sounds and scents without consciousness, though in after years they would remain to him eternal emblems of the charm of evening.

He moved across to where Ethel leaned on the gate in a print frock that protested the arrival of a visitor as no affair of hers.

'That skite Niven's coming,' said Robert.

'I suppose so,' said Ethel.

'D'you think he's chasing after Hetty?'

'I don't know.'

Robert hesitated for some moments before coming to the point of these exchanges.

'Saw you talking to the new parson's daughter,' he remarked casually.

'Yes.'

Unconscious of a confessional admission, Robert lowered his voice.

'What's she like?' he asked.

'Rather a common sort of girl,' said Ethel calmly.

'Ho,' said Robert, annoyed.

A further period of vacillation found him leaning on the shrubbery fence. In the yard Uncle Jobson, in the bedgown and smoking-cap of domestic privacy, was actively sorting out a miscellaneous collection of bottles, ranging them in the order of their financial value along the garden fence.

Against the wood-shed was piled an immense rubbish heap, made up of old pots, bottles, jam tins, kerosene tins, spokes of wheels, barrel hoops, wire, old iron,

pieces of crockery, the remains of a perambulator, bed slats, defunct kettles, and such refuse as is thrown over backyard fences. This hoard was the property of Uncle Jobson, collected in his daily walks abroad, for he was as assiduous in raking over the Council rubbish tips as any small boy in the township, and counted the day wasted if he failed to carry home some piece of lumber to his store.

Standing up to ease the recumbent posture of his back he observed Robert, and greeted that nephew with the withering emphasis of scorn.

'What's doin' here?' he demanded.

'Nothing,' said Robert.

'Ye have no lessons to do, it seems,' exclaimed the martinet, shooting out his upper lip in fierce derision.

'Lobster faced old sausage,' said Robert to himself, leaving that intolerant neighbourhood.

In the seclusion of the latticed fern house, now that the dusk had fallen, he lit his pipe and addressed his irritation to the soothing influence of tobacco.

He noted the arrival of the guest, and could hear his practised drawl and Hetty's frivolous greeting, and presently some dashing chords from the piano. Robert knew well the formula by which men guests were entertained. He could hear them going through the tattered family music, the exchange of appreciation, and theatrical reminiscence, and finally the voice of the guest upraised in a throaty, cultured tenor—evidences that brought Uncle Jobson hastening from his treasure trove of rubbish to peer through the window with impassioned curiosity.

It was dark now, and Robert's restless mood carried him out at the front gate, to saunter as far as the parsonage. Here he stood for some time, staring at the

plain brick cottage, standing back in a strip of untidy garden, with attenuated shrubs and grass sprouting in the gravel paths. It had become mysterious, this place; it contained a girl.

The front door was open, showing a dark perspective of passage terminating in a faint light from the kitchen. Another dim glow penetrated through the front parlour blind. Robert's mind became active over these domestic evidences. The mother, he decided, was in the kitchen. The father, of course, was deeply employed with sermons in the parlour. What, then, could be simpler for the daughter than to step into the garden, graciously accept his well-chosen words of introduction, and agree forthwith to his proposal for a walk down the flat.

The highly improbable was at once submerged in the eminently desirable. In his mind he rehearsed the impending dialogue, in which some brilliant sentiments were urged. So wrought upon was he by these mental exercises that the sudden opening of a door, casting a bar of light across the passage, startled him into a flutter of expectation, instantly extinguished. The form which emerged was tall, angular, stooping and sombre, a sort of clerical crow, outlined against the lighted passage.

Robert slunk off home. Those defrauded expectations sent him for consolation to the pipe, and he lingered on the footpath, morosely cutting up tobacco. At the far end of the Piper fruit garden was a clump of twisted fir trees, overhanging the fence and making at all times a secluded and private corner by their shade. To this mass of darkness moved Robert, cautiously, for it was the black hour before the moon, and not infrequently one encountered cows reposing here of an evening. He struck a match to light his pipe, and into

its feeble illumination a figure moved, coming from the direction of the flat.

'Hallo, Jerry,' said Robert, recognising his friend Arnold.

'Oh, it's you, is it, Bob?' said Arnold, and halted.

'How'd you get home last night?' enquired Robert with interest.

'All right. How did you?'

'We had a bit of a chase,' said Robert, implying that danger had attended that hasty departure from the Fire Brigade window. 'We thought you and Pinch were caught.'

'No fear,' said Arnold. 'We let them bust in the door and then joined the crowd. They thought we'd come in with them. Safest thing to do in the dark.'

'I don't know so much about that,' said Robert.

'It stands to reason,' said Arnold, moving towards the house. 'You know which way to go, but the other fellow doesn't. Burglary's simple if you keep that rule in mind.'

'Yes, that's true,' said Robert, mentally repudiating this light-hearted theory.

'When in doubt, stand still. The Burglar's Golden Rule,' said Arnold. 'Who's that singing?' he added, pausing at the front gate.

'That chap Niven.'

'He doesn't sing badly.'

They loitered at the gate, to an accompaniment of Dr. Niven's throaty tenor.

O amorous dove,
Type of Ovidius Naso,
This heart of mine
Is soft as thine,
Although I dare not say so.

'That's one of my songs,' remarked Arnold. He hummed the refrain, delivering the facile notes with certainty and ease. A figure strolling in the garden caused him to cease abruptly, with a trace of embarrassment.

'Good evening, Miss Piper,' he said, raising his hat.

'Good evening,' said Ethel stiffly. She seemed about to retreat, but hesitated in a shamefaced acknowledgment of social diffidence. There was an awkward silence, which Arnold found it necessary to break by saying:

'Well, I must be getting home, Bob.' He raised his hat to Ethel and walked off, leaving Robert at least irritably conscious of social ineptitude.

'You seem rather friendly with that youth,' said Ethel at length.

'That's right,' sneered Robert, 'keep it up. It's only the rotten snobbery of you people that makes Arnold out to be no class.'

'I don't know the man,' snapped Ethel.

'You stand there an' stare at him as if he was a blooming cadger,' said Robert, 'whereas,' he added with conscious generosity, 'he's a very superior chap.'

'Is he?' said Ethel indifferently. They reached the verandah, where Hetty met them in a flutter of suppressed irritation.

'Oh, there you are at last,' she exclaimed to Ethel. 'Go in and talk to Dr. Niven at once, while I see about supper.'

'It's not *my* business to entertain him,' said Ethel resentfully.

'Do as you're told!' exclaimed Hetty. 'I won't have you sneaking about out here when people call. It's the vilest bad manners.'

'Oh, bother,' said Ethel, and went inside. Hetty darted up the passage, leaving Robert on the verandah, where he remained peering through the window curtains with a self-imposed expression of scorn on his features. His resentment was excited by Niven's immaculate appearance, his languid manner, and the ease with which he moved among Hetty's bric-à-brac, social graces which Robert ascribed to ostentation intended to belittle those who lacked them.

The guest turned from the music stand to greet Ethel, who slipped hurriedly down among the sofa cushions, while Niven remained standing with his back to the mantelshelf looking down at her with an air of tolerance designed to assure her that he was really not at all alarming.

Ethel's fluttered air and shy, darting glances excused something in the way of condescension. These evidences of youthful nervousness gratified the conscious power of the adult male. They certainly had a humanising effect on Niven, who, in his desire to unbend graciously, forgot to drawl and spoke quite naturally. He seemed by his attentive glances to be reviewing Ethel's good looks, as though discovering them for the first time.

The implacable psychologist on the verandah uttered a snort of criticism and went off to bed. As he passed the drawing-room door he heard Ethel say hesitatingly:

'I—I heard you singing from the verandah. I love listening to music in the dark, d—don't you?'

II

Mrs. Piper's vision of her son Robert was the negative vision of any other parent. It embraced chiefly the things he was not doing. Harbouring the universal

prejudice, she supposed the existence of those about her depended on the peculiar phenomenon of her own eyesight. As a consequence, Robert's existence presented a frequency of blank spaces. She saw him slouching in the passage, frowning at the meal table, or sitting in his room with text-books on the table and a dissatisfied expression on his face. She saw him always distrait, drifting on the outskirts of family affairs with an ostentatious aloofness which was inclined to reward enquiry with an explosion of temper.

As a solution to these evidences of misanthropy, proper to his age, Mrs. Piper proposed that Robert should stay home at night and study text-books. Robert's solution was to make the best of those blank spaces in Mrs. Piper's optical vision of his existence by such expedients as the town afforded. At intervals the curtain was a little lifted upon these interludes, and Mrs. Piper's vision was greatly disturbed.

Such a disclosure was the affair of the publican's daughter, as announced by Hetty.

There had been a concert in the Town Hall, to which Hetty and Ethel had gone, escorted by Dr. Niven. At this function the social dignity of their position in the three-shilling seats had been greatly outraged by the presence of their brother Robert in the shilling seats, accompanied by the daughter of a common public-house keeper.

Hetty's indignation at this public affront to the family's gentility was not at all abated by the time Robert reached home, after escorting his lady friend back to her father's pub.

He found a tribunal waiting for him in the dining-room, consisting of his mother, Hetty and Ethel, and, whatever theories he may have entertained regarding

the desirability of publicans' daughters, this was hardly the place to vindicate them with success. He had come prepared for a squabble by the austere message of Hetty's eye during the performance, and he hoped he had a reasonable explanation to offer.

'I tell you that I met her purely by accident,' he said.

'That is no excuse,' said Mrs. Piper severely. 'You had no right whatever to be seen in public with such a girl in the presence of your sisters.'

'But hang it all, where's the harm? I met her purely by accident——'

'Accident!' ejaculated Hetty. 'The truth was you deliberately went down to the hotel and brought her up. You were standing at the corner when we passed, waiting for the wretched creature.'

'I tell you', said Robert, with elaborate fury, 'I happened to run against her as I went in——'

'Then', said Mrs. Piper, with an air of finality, 'you should have simply raised your hat and passed on.'

'But dash it, I couldn't stop the girl sitting next me.'

'Your sisters were present, and you should have simply got up and taken another seat. I am surprised', added Mrs. Piper, expressing that emotion by inflating her chest, 'that you should know such girls, much less sit through an entire performance with one.'

'Of course he knows such girls,' said Hetty impatiently, 'and he's welcome to know them, for all I care. The thing I object to is having one of them publicly thrust on me as a friend of the family.'

'Talk sense!' ejaculated her brother.

'In future,' went on Hetty, 'you'll kindly remember to pay your attentions to servant girls and publicans' daughters in private. Don't do it when I'm present, that's all I ask. I never felt so small in my life, with you

sitting there with that gaping hoyden leaning against your shoulder. I've no doubt you were affectionately holding her hand, like a butcher boy out with his sweetheart.'

'You be damned!' shouted Robert, deeply insulted.

'Robert!' exclaimed Mrs. Piper.

'I don't care, I'm sick of it. She bosses the whole house. Let her mind her own dam' business. I don't interfere with her chasin' after Niven——'

'How dare you?' exclaimed Hetty.

'So you do. Anybody can see it with half an eye——'

These intimacies were suddenly disrupted by the banging of a door, the sound of hasting bare feet in the passage, and the precipitate entrance of Uncle Jobson.

With his white hair on end, his bedgown bundled on wrong side out, and his corns indecently exposed beneath the skirts of his nightgown, he was sufficiently betrayed as the creature of intemperate curiosity.

'What's all this?' he exclaimed. 'Rantin' the hoose down. What's doin' here indeed?'

There was some evidence of a desire to evade the consequence of this intrusion. Hetty snatched up her hat and cloak, darted a vicious look at Robert, and turned to the door. Robert drew himself a glass of soda water from the seltzogene on the sideboard. Ethel, who had contributed nothing to the discussion but an air of aloofness from such squalid disclosures, continued to remain aloof.

It was left for Mrs. Piper to support the onus of Uncle Jobson's glare of enquiry.

'It's time you were in bed, children,' she said with an air of finality.

Uncle Jobson was down instantly on this intention to defraud him of a just perquisite in scandal.

'What's all this about, I wish to ask ye?' he exclaimed.

'Ye hear me speak, I hope,' he added significantly to Mrs. Piper.

'Oh, nothing, Uncle,' said Mrs. Piper impatiently. 'I merely had to speak to Robert, that was all.'

'Ay,' said Uncle Jobson, with the air of an encouraging cross-examiner, 'ye had to speak to him. An' what about?'

Mrs. Piper sought for a choice of politic evasions.

'Robert has merely been acting foolishly, and I am grieved to say he spoke rudely to his sisters. His conduct has not been exactly bad, but he has acted in an ungentlemanly manner. . . .'

If Mrs. Piper expected this explanation to meet the demands of Uncle Jobson's appetite for scandal, she was mistaken. He struck an attitude of alarm, as one prepared to hear abhorrent things.

'Never tell me,' he exclaimed, 'the feller's been drinkin'.'

'No, no, no,' said Mrs. Piper peevishly, and in desperation turned to Robert. 'I think you had better go to bed,' she said.

Robert slouched off at once, repudiating compunction for leaving his character behind him by slamming his bedroom door. And in the spirit of one who performs an act of reprisal, he kicked his boots off as loudly as possible and threw his clothes all over the floor.

'I'm sick of it,' he said to his pyjamas. 'For two bloomin' pins I'd clear out and leave the dam' place for good.'

In that dark spirit of renunciation he climbed into bed and composed himself with a scowl to read 'The Vanity of Human Wishes.'

It is well enough to escape in pedantic hexameters

the small annoyances of life, but these affairs are always a trifle overdone in families. There are too many people who permit themselves a word on the subject of our privacies.

The point of exasperation was achieved for Robert by a sort of chant, or rant, from Uncle Jobson at the breakfast table, interjected with mouthfuls of bacon and eggs. As thus:

'What's this I hear of ye?'

'Trapesing oot with riff-raff, is it?'

'The wench from the public house, oh ay.'

'A fine proceedin'.'

'The father's a bla'guird.'

'Sells liquor o' the sawbeth.'

'The daughter's a baggage.'

'Fine company for ye.'

'Oh ay, indeed.'

'Grand doin's.'

At this point Robert hurled his knife and fork at his bacon and eggs, kicked over his chair and kicked his way out of the room, an exhilaration of kicking that carried him all along the passage and ended with a door kicked violently shut.

'Really,' said Mrs. Piper, when the vibrations of this performance had subsided, 'that boy's temper is becoming ungovernable.'

'I'd govern him,' said Uncle Jobson, not at all disconcerted at the success of his chant. 'I'd cool his tantrums.'

'I don't know why you don't insist on father sending him into the shop,' said Hetty vindictively. 'It's simply a farce, the way he pretends to be studying.'

'Ye happen to be right,' said Uncle Jobson, expressing approval of this sentiment by masticating with

extreme rapidity.

In secret Mrs. Piper deprecated these severities, admitting a pang of compunction for Robert's unfinished breakfast.

Robert, participating for more urgent reasons in this pang, did his best to make a moral feast of the consciousness of martyrdom. As admitting the unsatisfactory nature of this diet, he presently emerged with an air of dyspeptic gloom, and coming upon Ethel in the passage drew her aside into the lumber room.

'I've had enough of this,' he said, closing the door. 'I'm going to clear out.'

Ethel received this evidence of the dire effects of parting a man from his breakfast with composure.

'You heard that rotten old ass at breakfast,' said Robert. 'What right has he got shoving his nose into my business. He's got no more right than a perfect stranger. Yet the mater encourages him. The mater actually tells this stinking old fool my private affairs.'

'You ought to know what to expect,' said Ethel. 'You go to a concert openly with a vulgar creature like Ruby Cassidy, knowing that Hetty would be there.'

Robert had clearly had enough of that intolerable subject. From a spasm of fury he subsided into gloom.

'You don't understand,' he said. 'If you were a man, you'd understand. As it is, you're a girl.'

Stigmatised in that capacity, Ethel merely smiled in a secret and superior manner.

'A man', said the Misanthrope, 'has got his life to lead.' He hesitated, casting about in his mind for examples of this singular fact. The desire to boast a little, hard to resist even in a sister's presence, stirred him to elaborate certain hints revealing that masculine existence hidden from the cloistered lives of females.

'You think life's a matter of sitting in drawing-rooms and having afternoon tea,' he said cynically. 'That sort of thing may satisfy women, but it's no good to a man. Women are subservient. As far as they are concerned, they've got to hang round till a man comes along and marries them. But a man must see life. A man's got to have his affairs of the heart. You think love's a matter of sentiment, and all that. You think a man falls sentimentally in love, and so on.' Robert laughed tolerantly.

'A man', he said, 'uses woman as a toy. When he's finished with her he throws her aside. Naturally. A man doesn't want to sacrifice his life for a woman. At the same time, having his passions to consider, he regards women as necessary. Very charming, and all that. Dainty, if you like, but a toy. Something to pass an idle hour away with.'

Ethel listened to these profundities without alarm.

'If you'll take my advice,' she said, 'you won't bring a toy like Ruby Cassidy to a concert when Hetty's about, that's all.'

Robert subsided into gloom.

'What's the good of talking to you,' he said, 'You don't understand.'

He did not appear at lunch, having substituted for that meal some furtive attentions to the pantry. The afternoon presented Mrs. Piper with a further hiatus in Robert's existence, and towards evening maternal uneasiness despatched Peter to search this blank space for evidence of the Misanthrope. Peter went straight to the bowling green. As an admirer of Robert, Peter kept a respectful eye on his brother's habits, and knew considerably more about them than Mrs. Piper. He found Robert seated in old Bill's cabin, there being present old Bill, Jubber, and a can of stale beer. The apartment

was full of evening and tobacco smoke, so Peter was forced to announce his mission with some vagueness of direction.

'You're wanted home,' he said, peering modestly in at the door.

The gloom evolved Robert, his hair ruffled, his face red, and a generous looseness in his action, as though he had come slightly undone at the joints. He led Peter some distance along the path, and with an indolent gesture fell into the hedge.

'Tight's Hell,' he remarked, in explanation of this act. Any audience is better than none, when one supports the character of a Misanthrope Driven to Drink. Robert emerged from his temporary retirement and eyed Peter majestically.

'Home,' he said. 'Dam' if I will.'

'Ma sent me,' said Peter, excusing any complicity in the matter. The Misanthrope corrected another lapse in the direction of the hedge, and appeared to reconsider the wisdom of a little caution.

'Teller', he said darkly, 'couldn' find me. Un'erstan'? Search everywhere. Norra sign.'

'I'll tell her', said Peter, 'you must a' gone for a walk to Ballarat.'

Robert, with kingly tolerance, gave Peter a clout on the head in token of dismissal, and Peter ran off home, charmed to be admitted as an intimate of Robert's majestic depravities.

Fortunately for the integrity of Mrs. Piper's vision of Robert's existence, the immediate spectacle of his return was reserved for old Bridget the cook. This aged retainer, visiting the wood shed with a candle in quest of to-morrow's kindling, discovered a recumbent form, without a hat, and with a boot clutched in each hand,

slumbering against the wood heap.

In the shock of this disclosure, old Bridget, who was given to a theatrical display of the emotions, went through a series of fainting attitudes, with gaspings and clutchings at the heart, expressive of great moral agony.

Aroused by these sounds of emotion, and the spectral evolutions of a candle, the recumbent one opened an eye and glared horribly.

'Was up?' he demanded.

'Och, Master Robert, I thought yez was a child o' God,' wailed old Bridget, announcing that the wood shed beheld a shattered reputation.

'Utter rot,' said Master Robert. By this he was understood to repudiate any absurd display of sentiment over so ordinary a procedure as slumbering on a wood heap.

And as further evidencing that one removed one's boots for obvious reasons, he remarked, 'Sore feet,' and stepped majestically out of the wood shed, leaving his boots behind him.

By this ready display of a responsible bearing he managed to reach his bedroom door and lock it behind him before old Bridget's performance of fainting and gasping in the passage brought Mrs. Piper on the scene; and there, temporarily, the affair ended.

It is all very well carrying things off with a high hand by locking doors upon oneself at midnight. Doors must be opened some time or other and their secrets submitted to a little airing.

The whole affair, from the publican's daughter to old Bridget's revelations, greatly disturbed Mrs. Piper. As the only means at hand of attacking the problem of having a son nineteen years of age, Mrs. Piper had what she called 'a serious talk' with Robert. In his diary,

Robert described this procedure as 'a hell of a jawing'.

From either aspect it was hardly successful in solving the problem of Robert's age. That problem, indeed, was not exactly in Mrs. Piper's hands. Even tadpoles become frogs in time and sound a hoarse note of rebellion from the duck-pond. Nature, in these matters, is singularly indifferent to maternal anxiety, though Mrs. Piper did her best to force some sort of responsibility on Nature by looking at Robert whenever she could catch his eye, with a very creditable effect of suffering sadness, which Robert rendered ineffective by annotating in private as 'utter bloody rot'.

Having such a good mother he had to protect himself against her somehow.

III

Still, Mrs. Piper's meditations on an essential prophylactic to beer and publicans' daughters were effective in bestowing Mr. John Bandparts on Robert's existence.

As Robert was destined to drift into journalism, his studies were gratuitously imposed on an illiterate calling, but in his character as a professional tutor of the young that was not Mr. Bandparts' affair.

Mr. Bandparts was a heavy, portly gentleman, arriving at middle age with some reluctance. Herein he did not so much express resentment at the common lot as lament the necessity for periodically making a fresh start in life. To a man of forty-five, conscious of a career left behind him on the high road to fortune, this species of financial excursion is apt to lack the exhilaration of travel.

For Mr. Bandparts had an infirmity, and its name, in spite of some generous casuistry on the subject by Mr. Bandparts, was Beer.

In this relation, Mr. Bandparts' profession of teacher was in a constant state of suspension to the dictates of his mighty thirst. With a stately and commanding presence, a baritone voice and a baritone eye, the walk of a drum-major and the moustache of a dragoon, with a baronial dignity of stomach and the highest certificates to his credit, Mr. Bandparts had every qualification to assist him into a good billet save the policy of temperance to enable him to retain it.

When at home, he lived with his aged mother in a little cottage all hung with honeysuckle and banksia roses, with a large bust of Seneca staring severely over the front garden fence.

From this secure retreat Mr. Bandparts was constantly going away with dignity to occupy important scholastic positions, and coming back after a period in a state of moral ruin. Such a return was understood to convey a complete renunciation of Beer, and the expression of his face, to be seen of a morning peering from his bower of honeysuckle and banksia roses, was one of ferocious rectitude belittled by remorse.

It was in this state of moral convalescence that his attention was directed to Robert's studies, and it was in this state, adulterated by a more human depression, that Robert found him on the evening of his first visit, in company with Seneca, staring severely over the garden fence together.

There was a hint of satiety in Mr. Bandparts' eye, as of one who had gazed sufficiently on a joyless, beerless future, but at the sight of Robert he became guiltily upright, and with an inflexible rectitude ushered his visitor into the small front parlour.

This apartment was so small, indeed, that Mr. Bandparts seemed enormously distended by comparison. Its

mantelshelf hardly reached to his stomach, and the seating accommodation of the sofa was out of all proportion to the seating accommodation of Mr. Bandparts. There was a small round-topped table, with a red and black cloth cover, there were antimacassars on the chairs, there were china dogs on the mantelshelf, there were a couple of humble pictures of Swiss scenery, and unexpectedly there was a shelf full of battered yellow-covered volumes in Greek and Latin text, a pile of gritty numbers of the 'Mercure', an edition of Montaigne's 'Essays', Boswell's 'Life of Johnson', 'Hadji Baba', and other evidences of a leisured taste in reading.

Here Mr. Bandparts at once proceeded to put the position as between master and pupil on an eminently sound footing, clearly exulting in this opportunity of exercising some baritone oratory that had suffered a period of disuse.

'Advice, Piper,' said Mr. Bandparts, 'is a thing that everybody wants, everybody gives, and nobody takes. Now I won't give you advice, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll make you work. I'll work you damned hard,' said Mr. Bandparts, luxuriating in a prospect of a Roman integrity. 'I'll make you sweat. I've had hundreds of your sort through my hands, and I'll tell you what the trouble is. You're too damned intelligent to work. You've got the sort of intelligence that won't be any use to you for another ten years. Very well, I'll forestall that period by temporarily stultifying your mentality with text-books. That's about all this rubbish we call education amounts to. I speak to you as an expert. You may have all the beer, tobacco and servant girls you please, but don't make them an excuse for loafing. I have my own credit to consider,' added

Mr. Bandparts, in a moment of lyrical extravagance, 'and my debased job is to get you through this exam. Very well. If you won't go through it to please yourself, damme, you'll be kicked through it to please me.'

With this professional peroration he put Robert through a peremptory examination which disclosed the disjointed nature of his scholarship. In a sweeping, competent manner, this matter was adjusted, the future course of lectures prescribed, and the whole subject pushed off the round-topped table with a vigorous gesture.

'You smoke, of course,' said Mr. Bandparts.

As he produced a large briar pipe himself, Robert assumed that smoking was permitted in the front parlour and gladly produced his pipe too.

'Read poetry?' went on Mr. Bandparts, with a cross-examining air. That induction admitted, he added relentlessly:

'Write it too, don't you?'

'Well, a bit,' said Robert, secretly astonished at this evidence of divination.

'You'll get over that in time,' said Mr. Bandparts tolerantly.

Robert made some sounds of negation. He wished it understood that Poetry would be his life's passion, but Mr. Bandparts seemed to think he knew better.

'Not your type, Piper,' said he. 'You'll read poetry till it ceases to react on your spinal column, and then you'll give it up to earn a living, or get married, or something of that sort.'

'But,' said Robert, astonished. 'Don't you read poetry?'

'I do not,' said Mr. Bandparts. 'I may, of course, pick up a volume of poems, but to decipher is not to

read. Reading is an act of faith. I lack it. Possibly I repudiate it. I am told that nobody reads poetry to-day. I answer that nobody deserves to. An age that makes art the meticulous delineation of a cabbage has the mentality of a cabbage. Why should I help it to live by driving upon it the gigantic reverberations of my response to poetry. Bah, I prefer to read rubbish, for thereby I bestow rubbish on the universe.'

'You hunt girls, of course,' he added formally.

'Oh, well——' began Robert.

'I said "of course",' remarked Mr. Bandparts. 'It is the only sign of returning animation I have observed in the youth of to-day. They are beginning feebly to venture into the open, where girls can get at them. Why, even in my youth, which is but thirty years ago, it was the custom to hide from women behind a horrid barricade of whiskers. At the age of puberty beards were grown. It was an admission of terror; a leap into middle age; a renunciation of the adventure of youth, which is to get some wench into what is still, I believe, called "trouble". At the debased period of my emergence into this earth it was called "ruin". Let us hope that to-morrow it will merely be called a nuisance.

'You find, of course, females of the lower orders most amenable to fornication?' he added.

'Oh, well——' said Robert.

'Don't announce that you haven't the courage to seduce in your own social stratum. I know you haven't. That is doubtless a condition of the still-existing myth that sisters are sacred. Degrading to sisters as may be the association of such a word, I am glad to observe now-a-days that to mention sisters in relation to sex is not the cue for an outburst of male hysterics, as it was in my youth. You merely look furtive and say, "But

hang it all". No doubt another generation will see the sacredness of sisters descend from the suburbs to the slums, in which case you will no longer be reduced to seducing the sisters of the lower orders, but may practice freely on those who frequent the home circle.'

'But dam' it all,' said Robert.

'Your protest has already been admitted,' said Mr. Bandparts. 'Nor will I talk to you about the Ptolemys. I merely note the metamorphosis of the social ideal. What the educated classes believed yesterday the middle class believes to-morrow, and the lower orders a month after that. Thus the dream of the slavey materialises in the Duchess, the rapacity of a hodman in the Millionaire, and the aggrandisement of a washerwoman in Queen Victoria of England. Let me see, you are nineteen, I think?'

'Yes,' said Robert.

'And a brother?'

That, also, was admitted.

'And a son?'

There was no denying it.

'You have the whole social imbecility of my generation on your shoulders,' said Mr. Bandparts. 'Possibly the worst generation that was ever generated. The 'fifties at least strutted, the 'eighties staggered, but the 'nineties have fallen flat. How you are to arrive at the upright posture again I cannot say. For my part, realising myself as a bad joke perpetrated by a comic-paper God, I refuse to laugh at myself. Or to roar at myself. I observe myself. There I have you under the microscope. Of course,' he added, 'your parents, having arrived at middle age, assume that naturally you will exhibit their own detachment from the activities of copulation.'

'Oh, well, you know what——'

'What parents are. Of course I do. Am I not for ever dealing with their by-products? Do they not sneakingly bestow on me their crass inability to do anything with their own misbegotten progeny, a subterfuge which I scornfully fub off on text-books? Of course you find home a hell of a place to live in.'

Robert did, with fervour, and Mr. Bandparts was provided with a fresh theme to operate drastically on. In fact, by catechising the social system as exemplified in Robert, he supplied himself with subject matter for the evening. Robert listened, dazed, but flattered. The ardour with which Mr. Bandparts went on talking must infer esteem for his audience. Professionally, Mr. Bandparts had acquired the art of enforcing attention on himself. He added gesture to the emphasis of speech. If the utterance was imperious, he threw back his head; where the cadence indicated gloom, he lowered it; for a sardonic effect, made play with his eyebrows; a sentiment repudiated was hurled through the window, a ruthless disclosure pointed direct at his listener.

At intervals he got up, reached for his hat, muttered a rejection of it, and hurled himself into talk again. On the whole, he appeared to enjoy himself, and was still booming away when his mother brought in the supper tray at eleven. Mrs. Bandparts was a little neat, withered old lady with knotty hands, and she appeared to eye her immense son with an air of disconcerting intelligence.

'John,' she said, 'there is a cup of cocoa for you and young Mr. Piper, and I hope it will do you both good.'

Mr. Bandparts patted his little old mother encouragingly on the head.

'Cocoa, Mother,' he said, 'is a highly nutritious substance. I believe that is advanced as a reason for drinking it. The question is, does young Mr. Piper *like* cocoa?'

'If young Mr. Piper drinks nothing worse than cocoa, he'll come to no harm,' said the old lady firmly.

'I like cocoa very much, Mrs. Bandparts,' said Robert.

'I—I admire it myself, immensely,' said Mr. Bandparts, eyeing his cup with secret abhorrence. 'My mother', he added, as the old lady, with several warning nods at him, shut the door behind her, 'is a—ah—a woman. That is to say, a ruthless adherent to the æsthetic of the belly.'

He appeared to suffer some slight depression of spirits in the presence of the cocoa, and when Robert had finished his cup, along with a coffee biscuit, Mr. Bandparts saw him to the door with a reminder, as of a matter somewhat overlooked, that study would commence at eight o'clock to-morrow evening.

Passing out at the front gate, Robert seemed to be aware of Mr. Bandparts, with a familiar gesture, throwing something out of the window. A baritone mutter, remorsefully subdued, appeared to admit that whatever opinion Mr. Bandparts may have had regarding the nutritive qualities of cocoa, his courage failed him at the point of testing its virtues on himself.

CHAPTER V

I

ROBERT's attendance on Mr. Bandparts was gratefully endorsed by both of them. It procured Robert the dispensation of nightly freedom and Mr. Bandparts a respectful audience. In the lust of a confirmed monologist he conferred on Robert the charm of patronage from an august elder. In a week's time they were necessary to each other and friendship was established.

Still, with the key of the street in his pocket, Robert permitted himself a reasonable margin for entertainment, and Mr. Bandparts was left at intervals to spend the evening with Seneca in the front garden.

'Ha,' said Mr. Bandparts, commenting on such a lapse, 'we took a night off yesterday. What was our diversion, beer or servant girls?'

'Oh, nothing particular, J.B.,' said Robert. 'We had a bit of a night out, that's all.'

'We did,' said Mr. Bandparts sardonically. 'We had beer, no doubt. We went the pace.'

'Oh, we had a few,' remarked Robert, divided between a suspicion of derision from Mr. Bandparts and the pride of some accomplished drinking. 'We had —let's see—three long'uns at the Royal, two at the Bull and Mouth, and finished up with four at Cassidy's. He keeps a very good draught beer—Tasmanian.'

'Ha!' said Mr. Bandparts. 'You set up for a connoisseur, it seems. At your age this is depravity. You should be content to find all beer perfect. This is effrontery. This is cynicism. This is to peek and

botanise upon the divinity of beer. You are a renegade to the sacred dam' foolery of youth, whose creed of arrogant, fat-headed emancipation is summed up in the vile name of beer—beer—BEER.'

The reiteration of this talismanic word seemed to stir in Mr. Bandparts some genuine emotion of annoyance. He inflated his chest, twirled his heavy moustache, and thumped the table with a revulsion to thunderous indignation.

'Let me tell you, Piper,' he roared, 'that if you expect reprobation from me for these incipient evidences of a tendency to booze, you make a mistake. I'm no wet nurse for suckling drunkards, and I'll see you damned before I give you good advice. But I'll see you equally damned before I'll encourage you. So kindly keep the vainglorious enumeration of your pots for the benefit of those village idiots who compose your particular set of boozing companions.'

'Oh, all right,' said Robert sulkily, 'you needn't make such a row over a glass of beer. I'm not asking you to drink it.'

'Ha!' said Mr. Bandparts, reverting to normal baritonality, 'you do well. It would be poured over your head as a just reprisal. However, we may let the matter rest on the assumption that it is your business to be a dam' fool. I endorse the necessity, without respecting it.'

He gloomed for some moments above the round-topped table, and ejaculating 'Beer! Bah!' hurled that subject out of the window.

In a lesser mortal this might have been mere peevishness. Study that evening was pursued in a spirit of misanthropy, and when Mr. Bandparts saw Robert out at the front gate he paused to sweep the township with

a gesture of anathema.

'A damned hole, Piper,' said he. 'A cheese, with mites in it. The substance of life is merely to keep alive, not to live. Petrified in caution, these bumpkins. Safe! Removed from the spiritual stimulus of risk. They could at least take a saturnalia once a month and hunt each other's wives about the bush, but damme, they don't even climb a back fence to earn a neighbourly punch in the eye. Why, they never reach even the indignity of rolling in a gutter. How can they ever know that the stars exist?'

Life even in country towns must have some faint sense of her responsibilities, for in an idle moment she turned up with the parson's daughter again.

Robert ran into this desirable girl suddenly at the corner of the triangle one afternoon. Deprived by surprise of the disadvantages of preparation he stopped and raised his hat.

The parson's daughter smiled, stopped and hesitated, and thus committed Robert to the affair.

'Lovely day,' he said.

'Lovely,' said the parson's daughter.

'A bit warm,' said Robert.

'I like it warm,' said the parson's daughter.

A dreadful moment, the weather being disposed of. Robert felt suddenly that the consistency of his being was dough, that his ears were red hot and his feet immense. All the formulas for an instant display of wit, like fireworks, deserted him on the spot. The parson's daughter looked up the road and down the road, and twirled her handbag. She may have been as embarrassed as Robert, but she had the devilish ingenuity to appear quite at ease. Robert gave over scratching in the arid desert of gallantry and got out a remark sufficiently

debilitated of invention. 'How—d'you like Redheap?' he asked.

'I think it's a dull sort of place,' said the parson's daughter.

'That's the worst of country towns,' said Robert. 'They—they're dull.'

It was a subject, anyway, and it got the conversation on a pair of shaky legs. But other communications sped with brilliant effect: catches of the breath, an aroma of hair, shufflings, embarrassed pauses.

Robert, of course, discovered that brown eyes, a little pigmented, and a dusky texture of skin epitomised the desirable in girls. Breasts, too, should be full, pressing an outline into the blouse; legs, to be perfect, should take that curve erroneously defined as bandy. It gave a naïve, delightful inward turn to the toes.

The girl, with eyebrows arched aloofly, continued to glance about the street, detached from any authority for Robert's avid glances.

But she was a simpleton really, and when her eyes met his fully her eyelids fluttered and a flush ran under the dusky gold of her skin. He was a nice boy, she thought. Black hair, eyes as brown as her own, even teeth, a comparatively nice straw hat. A lynx-eyed impartiality might pause at a collar, rumpled, in its second day of use, and a tie that works up at the back, but when one shakes hands at parting, and the clutch of predatory male fingers sends a thrill to the very armpit, the balance is all on the side of niceness.

She glanced back twice, in order to smile when Robert waved his hand, and at the corner waved hers swiftly and furtively in return.

As for Robert, he went home in a whistling humming state of exaltation. With the bedroom door shut, he

produced his diary at once, and in it wrote these words:

'Coming home this afternoon met the new parson's daughter. Got going easily first go off. Found her delectable as regards appearance, fine eyes, and the *tout ensemble* equally so.'

The baldness of this statement left exultation unsatisfied. He put away his diary and became industrious on a blank sheet of an exercise book.

The frown of metrical calculation on his brow and the concentrated vacuity of his gaze betrayed the period of intellectual parturition. Misanthropy had fled his muse, which touched an optimistic string.

Afternoon

To stroll thus alone is a pity,
  Enjoying of sunshine the sweets,
Ha! a girl—young, delightful and pretty,
A few words, light, pointed and witty,
A bow. Shall we stroll through the city?
  So! One meets.

Night

One waits in the darkness, heart beating,
  Will she come? One has starts,
Ha! She comes. Some swift words of greeting,
A clasp of the hand, fingers meeting,
An embrace, some light kisses, time fleeting,
  So! One parts.

The poet's licence in the matter of kisses was premature, but founded on high hopes. That evening he spent lurking about the parsonage, and from behind the oleanders was rewarded by the spectacle of his inspiration carrying a tray down the passage.

Next day, from a hole in the stable loft, which commanded a view of the parsonage back premises, he saw her appear three times in the yard during the morning and once in the afternoon. From this it may be

gathered that the poet was keeping his inspiration under close observation, which was rewarded by her appearance in the cape-broom at sunset. In such time as it took Robert to fall from the loft into a loose box, dart round by the cowshed and climb the fence, he joined her, an indecency of haste that somewhat disconcerted the casual assumption of her presence there. The interview was further disturbed by an uneasy sense of being possibly overlooked from their respective back yards, and the conversation was stilted to a degree. They spoke of the sunset and the seasonable heat of the day. Under the ban of an impersonal attachment they said it was nice in the cape-broom. Gossip, the divine road to intimacy, was lacking, and Robert was only permitted to discover her name by a harsh voice from the parsonage calling for 'Millie'.

'I must go,' she said, and went instantly, with the guilty acknowledgment of haste.

Robert went back to his room irritated by sociological doubts. It was an evidence of the peculiar nature of caste in country towns that he conceived a high sense of the delicacy with which the affair must be handled.

If Millie had been a servant girl there would have been no difficulties in the matter. With the lower orders one is unembarrassed by the courtesies. The formula is as simple as an invitation to dinner, for the leading question being 'What are you doing to-morrow night?' and the correct answer, 'Nothin',' the immediate rejoinder is 'Meet you down the Lake at half past seven.'

But we cannot hurry matters in this regal manner with parson's daughters. For all one knows of that infernal mystery, the female heart, they may repulse such overtures with loathing and contempt.

'Find myself greatly attracted,' wrote Robert in his

diary, 'as she is of the sensuous order, à la the soubrette, fine eyes, a plummy leg, etc. The trouble is a man has to be careful, as he may get the mitten should he obtrude too far on the so-called "delicacies".'

Saturday morning at least is hardly the time for such an intrusion, but seeing Millie pass the churchyard fence from his bedroom window Robert snatched his hat and darted at once in pursuit. He allowed her to enter the main street by way of the Royal Hotel corner, and fled round the opposite way to intercept her coming down. There was an embrasure formed by the baker's shutters, and here he waited for her, like an amorous brigand.

'Hallo,' he said, with the feeblest pretence of an unexpected meeting, and with a complete sense of the suicidal policy of such haste, added, 'I say, look here, what about—what about coming for a walk this evening round the Lake?'

Millie was dressed in an indifferent blouse and skirt, she was hampered by a bundle of greengroceries and a bag of eggs, and she knew one stocking had a hole in it.

'I couldn't possibly come,' she said coldly.

'Try,' urged Robert. 'It—it's lovely round the Lake at night.'

'I really couldn't.'

'Don't say that—look here, I'll wait for you at the gates at half past seven.'

'But, really——' protested Millie, backing away.

'But, hang it——' said Robert, following her. With disjointed reiterations they reached the corner, where Millie stopped him with a petulant shake of the head.

'It's no use asking me,' she said, 'I'm really not let out at night.'

Robert grasped at the faint encouragement of this admission.

'Will you come if you can?' he persisted.

'You don't understand. My father——'

'Will you try—look here. I'll wait for you on the off chance.'

Millie shook her head and frowned at the eggs. 'Oh, all right,' she said with an ill grace. 'I don't suppose there'll be a chance, though.'

On top of that she went off abruptly, leaving him to a fit of black ill temper. He was convinced that he had hopelessly ruined this promising affair, and suffered from spasms of kicking at nothing all the way home. As a natural result of this mental disturbance he went to the Lake at half past seven in a fever of expectancy and waited there two hours for her. Constitutionally, he was denied the consolation of philosophy during this vigil. Every female form that passed under the brief illumination of the bridge gaslamps threw him into a sweat of anticipation, and every disappointment into a villainy of gloom. He went home at length by the flat, where it was so dark that he fell over a cow, which he cursed in a spirit of absolute frenzy. There is a consolation in such ravings, or why should lovers entertain the ghoul that feeds upon their hearts. His muse suffered such a relapse in the hour of depression that nine verses of an appalling misanthropy could hardly allay her appetite for gall. They were called 'Delilah', and began:

> Fool, to trust to her plighted word,
> Whose deepest oath is a lie foresworn,
> A bitter laugh in the night is heard,
> For a man's strong passion is rent and torn
> In the Hell-born depth's of a Woman's scorn.

After that he was twice found brooding in the dark end of the passage by his mother, though there really was not much satisfaction in that. Also, he went without supper, which was less satisfactory still. But he read 'The City of Dreadful Night' through in bed, and felt the universe deserved it.

II

The episode of the parson's daughter languished for a period into insignificance, though that was hardly Robert's fault.

The next day, being Sunday, he retired after dinner to the loft, and through his spyhole was gratified with the spectacle of the Rev. Kneebone harnessing his old horse to a vehicle known locally as the Gospel chariot. This meant that the parson was going to Snaky Creek, to conduct the evening service there, and Robert at once arranged in his mind that Millie would now be free for an afternoon in the cape-broom, and he watched the tall awkward figure in its absurd black coat with the furtive calculation of an ambushed footpad, for even from a distance the Rev. Kneebone looked an intolerant specimen of the race of parents. He had the jerky, hasty movements of an ill-tempered man, and Robert could hear him muttering at the harness buckles, which were stiff with age.

Some physical disability caused him a peculiar twitching of the shoulder blades, and he paused at intervals to rasp at his thin grey beard, as though suffering a perpetual itch there.

The harnessing done, he barked suddenly at the house, and there appeared Millie, hatted and gloved, who got into the Gospel chariot, and was driven off by her father.

As the Rev. Kneebone had obviously done the whole thing to spite him, Robert was justifiably outraged, and retired to his room and lay on the bed for some time doing nothing but scowling.

His room was unpleasantly hot, for it stood in the full glare of the afternoon sunlight. It was part of a long weatherboard wing added to the house, which included the kitchen, the servants' rooms, the lumber room, and Uncle Jobson's bedroom.

The window of this unpropitious neighbour looked out on the churchyard, too, though Uncle Jobson, prejudiced to the habits of a colder climate, preferred to keep it shut and the blinds drawn. As a consequence his apartment smelt like the habitation of an aged bear addicted to snuff. Robert could hear him now, on the evidence of some nasal trumpeting, taking a siesta in his noxious den.

The rest of the family was scattered in the cooler portions of the house, and the kitchen wing was entirely given over to Uncle Jobson's snoring and an intermittent clinking of dishes in the kitchen. Robert's ears discarded this note of household drudgery, which he had grown up with, but a sound of giggling presently mitigated his occupation of scowling. It came also from the kitchen, and as anything so human as a giggle had long been scorched out of old Bridget by the heat of kitchen fires, these sounds of diversion could only come from Maggie, the housemaid.

That wench, besides the deadly austerity of her eye, went to church every second Sunday morning, every Sunday evening, and to week-day prayer meetings. Therefore the simplest code of experimental seduction must cock an ear to account for anything so rational as a giggle from such a source.

In that hope, Robert sauntered to the kitchen door and peered in. And thereat he, too, sniggered. The spectacle presented there warranted it. Grandpa Piper, with a long apron over his Sunday frock coat, was assisting old Bridget and the housemaid to wash up.

Perhaps this statement is too affirmative. There was the apron, certainly, and there were some proceedings going on with a tea-towel among the dinner dishes, but that Grandpa Piper participated responsibly in the function of kitchenmaid was not so apparent.

His practised somnambulism left the issue in doubt. He wiped, but made no conscious admission of wiping. His patriarchal beard was drabbled in the operations of a non-existent dish-cloth, his meek bald head reflected highlights of an unacknowledged kitchen window, his ear accounted not for ghostly giggles, nor old Bridget's protests at an intrusion on her office. Densely, blandly, dimly, remotely, he went on wiping dishes in some kitchen of Micomicon.

'Go along with you, Mr. Piper,' chanted old Bridget, 'before you have the missus on us, let alone you'll be breaking something on us, and us be blamed for it, for sez I, look at you there, ditherin' in your Sunday coat, and your beard in the wash-up, an' the dishes not properly wiped at all, at all.'

'He's going dotty,' thought Robert, pleased, and bestowed an appreciative wink on Maggie, who instantly refused to appreciate it. At his appearance all laxities of deportment vanished; wiping dishes became a function for their austere repression.

'Who's your new housemaid, Maggie?' persisted Robert, appealing to humour.

'I'm sure it's very good of your grandfather to help us, Master Robert,' said Maggie coldly.

And yet the wretched wench had long secret thighs and robust breasts, that forced their own admissions even through the steel and whalebone abominations into which the women of that generation wedged their bodies. When she reached up to the dresser Robert could see beneath the flexed deltoid the darkened patch of sleeve from a moist armpit.

Bah! to this waste of limbs, squandered in life's back kitchens. Would its trivial economics never learn that even a scrambled embrace in a little hot back bedroom, close with the peculiar odour of servant girls, was well worth having.

Robert retired to the yard, where he leaned on the garden fence and absorbed the special quality of Sabbath boredom, a melancholy compounded of peace, digestion, the obduracy of housemaids, and the consciousness of nothing, nothing, nothing to do.

The afternoon sunlight lay over the landscape, making a tapestry design in flat tints of brown gum trees, tin roofs, and white roadways. Nothing moved in this drowsy prospect save a mysterious agitation of boughs high up in the garden fir trees and a string of old Chinamen jogging past towards their camp below the flat. The sing-song of their conversation, chanted up and down the line, with the celestial's peculiar indifference to any personal address in speaking, was suddenly echoed in derision from the fir trees.

'Chin-a mucka high-lo, hi, ki yah,' sang the arborealists, now disclosed as Peter and a tadpole friend, hanging like bats in the tree-top.

An indignant squabble in remonstrance came from the Chinamen, who jogged a faster pace, for this traditional insult was not infrequently the signal for stones lobbed in their direction.

Leaning on the fence, Robert had a fleeting sense of the unfathomable immensity of time, as though a thousand years divided him from the arborealists in the tree-top.

Time did not move at all; it was moribund in space, while one remained fettered and helpless, never to attain the mountains of the future, beyond which lay freedom, money, happiness and girls.

This despair of the spirit endured only a flash of consciousness. He forgot it in turning back to the house. There, time suddenly moved to unexpected action. Maggie was in the passage, reaching up into the kitchen linen press, and her defenceless figure invited a contact to which he yielded without premeditation. In short, he put his arms round her waist and kissed the back of her neck. Apart from its effect of surprise, this ravished embrace was a signal failure. Maggie coldly removed his arm, shoved him aside, and closed the cupboard door.

'That'll do, Master Robert,' she said. 'You kindly keep your arms to yourself.'

'Be a sport, Maggie,' said Robert, covering his confusion in an effort to lay hold of her again.

Maggie merely pushed him aside and entered the kitchen.

'If you attempt to do that again I shall tell your mother,' was all she said.

With his self-respect at the mercy of such moral blackmail, Robert retreated to his hot little bedroom, where he damned and blasted the inhuman prudery of slavies till he recovered some measure of normal depression. For some time he stared at his picture of Dolores, who stared back at him with languorous disdain.

Passionate ladies, forsooth!—and life walled in with the barrier of their reserve, their evasive glances, their embattled prudery.

Again, the conviction of a moribund earth fell upon him: an earth of the incompetent male, shut out from that other earth which is a vast, exotic garden of femininity, of girls with epicene bodies, of women whose tender flesh one melted into, of amazons who gripped with ruthless thighs, of rampant hoydens, loose-jointed strumpets, peasant girls with goose-fleshed legs, shy virgins and salacious minxes with impish breasts—all naked in the sunlight, all motionless in the burgeoning of desire.

The jingle of afternoon tea things recalled him to a more particular sense of this earth's repudiation of the flesh, and he followed Maggie down the passage with a twinge of uneasiness. But she carried the tray to the verandah, handed its ministration over to Hetty, and departed with her usual air of unapproachable austerity.

Niven was seated on the cane lounge being entertained by Hetty and wriggled at by Ethel. He came now as a regular guest to Sunday's dinner, and already wore the air of a family intimate.

In his suit of grey flannels, the dandyism of his silk socks and gold-rimmed glasses, and the general impression he conveyed of being cool, clean, and thoroughly at ease stimulated Robert's usual resentment at these objectionable qualities in a male whose interest was obviously not in Robert, but in Robert's sisters.

'Why is not our brother among the fast set at the Lake this afternoon?' said Hetty, pouring out tea. 'Reckless young devils, they carry walking sticks and ogle the ladies. Which will you have, cake or sandwiches?' she added to the guest.

'Sandwich, please,' said Niven, nodding amiably at Robert, whom he secretly regarded as a boorish youth with all the objectionable qualities common to brothers with desirable sisters.

'You know,' went on Niven, continuing a conversation interrupted by the tea-tray, 'I think a play is beyond the resources of this place, but we might make a decent show of tableaux vivants, properly managed.'

The local tennis club was in the throes of an intellectual crisis, and had decided to substitute for progressive euchre parties a theatrical entertainment in the Town Hall. Niven was the inspiration of this ambitious project, for beneath his languid professional assumptions he harboured a secret itch for the drama.

Robert sat on the edge of the verandah and listened to Hetty's intelligent appreciation of the Doctor's suggestions with his customary scorn for anything of that nature from Hetty. He watched for an opportunity to interject a remark in the spirit of brotherly malice.

'There's only one chap can do anything on the stage here,' he said, 'and that's Jerry Arnold.'

'No doubt,' said Hetty slightingly. 'Only the fact is——'

'He keeps a bicycle shop,' said Robert. 'Pity he don't keep a draper's shop, and then he'd be among the blooming aristocrats.'

'I wasn't thinking of that, you ass,' said Hetty, with a momentary flush of honest family rancour. 'He's rather a disreputable youth,' she added to Niven, 'but of course that's no reason why he shouldn't be asked. He sings well, too.'

Niven caught sympathetically at an expression of annoyance that crossed Ethel's face.

'Our Ethel doesn't approve of the singing bicyclist?'

he suggested.

'Oh, I don't mind him,' said Ethel hastily. 'I was only thinking of Mrs. Waddleham and the Victoria Avenue push. You'll have all sorts of squabbles from that quarter over who ought to be invited.'

'Bother Victoria Avenue,' said Hetty, under the necessity of clearing herself of Robert's imputation of snobbery. 'There isn't enough talent there to run a church bazaar. We'll ask who we please.'

Ethel shrugged her shoulders, as implying no social responsibility in the matter.

'I think you are right,' said Niven to Hetty. 'We can't pick and choose in a country town. We'll have to take the best that offers.'

Robert finished his tea and strolled off to smoke a pipe in the stable, thus vindicating a masculine contempt for silk socks and social prattle.

And as additional approval of the masculine ideal he managed that evening to take Ruby Cassidy walking round the Lake, so something at least was snatched from the boredom of Sundays.

III

Robert walked to the lake with his arm round Ruby's waist, but he walked back with his hands in his pockets. In these simple terms he defined Ruby's status in the economics of bucolic seduction. She was fat, foolish, and with the selective discrimination of a cow in her amours, walking out indifferently with Robert, George, Jubber, or any other youth sufficiently pressed by gallantry to invite her. She was also a nuisance, for she extorted self-esteem for her favours by slapping and punching her lovers and putting them to really tremendous exertions before the favours were wrested from her.

Still, she was useful and very often necessary, and Robert, having dumped her at her own back gate, strolled on, admitting, with Voltaire, that this, after all, was a world passable enough.

George, seated on the chemist's shutters, seemed to think otherwise. He had not, as he admitted, participated in necessity's resources this month past, and was disposed to cavil at a bounty so meagrely allowanced.

'There's nothing in it, this knocking about with stray tarts,' said George. 'Take the case. You run agen Ruby Cassidy. "Come for a walk?" "Right." What happens? If it's cold you sit on a seat. If it's hot you sit on the grass. Million to one the ants get to you. If not, a bloomin' crowd comes doggin' you and whistling, "To be there, to be there." There's no comfort in the business. Now accordin' to my idea, marriage has its points. For why? Say it's cold. You go home, feelin' a bit tired. Well, there's whisky on the sideboard and you have a nip. Makes you feel good at once. Perhaps you have a fancy for a slice of beef, or a potted meat sandwich. If the missus is up, she gets it for you. If not, you get it for yourself. You have a smoke to top off with, glance over the paper, or Tom Paine, as the fancy takes you, and go to bed. And there you are. Instead of gettin' into a dam' cold bed on your own, there's a lovely girl waitin' for you. I tell you,' said George, making succulent noises to indicate a gourmet's rapture, 'the idea's *grand*.'

Robert was clearly moved by this dream picture, but qualified it with a sterner ideal.

'No, George,' he said. 'That side of marriage is all right, but what about the rows? You know as well as I do that all married people fight like cats and dogs. My idea is that marriage hampers a man. A man's got his

life to lead. Have women by all means, but don't marry them. I believe in mistresses, not wives. With a wife you're tied up for good. With a mistress, if you've had enough of her you can clear out and leave her.'

George betrayed on his owl's face an expression of grave disapproval.

'That won't do, Bob,' he said. 'You can't go leaving women in that way. It's that sort of thing that sends women on to the streets.'

It is the moralist who scores in these matters, when we are seated on the chemist's shutters at the age of nineteen.

'I don't mean to say I'd desert a woman,' explained Robert. 'You can always fix these things up. My idea is that there ought to be equal freedom on both sides.'

George, whose brain was now working under extreme intellectual pressure, repudiated this idea.

'What about the State?' he said. 'The State requires children.'

'It won't get them from me, if I can help it,' said Robert. 'I hate the very idea of having kids. If ever I got tied up with a woman my first idea would be—*no kids*.'

He retracted the gusto of this utterance hastily as a woman stepped into the patch of illuminated pavement, a trim little woman, bare-headed, with a medicine bottle in her hand.

'Good night, Mrs. Arnold,' said George and Robert, raising hats. Mrs. Arnold shaded her eyes, dazzled by the chemist's globes. She did not look like Mrs. Anybody, but like a schoolgirl playing at being grown up. That was the effect of her large solemn eyes and her two permanent dimples, which were always going to explode on the spot the pretence of being grown up.

'Oh, of course it's you two as usual, always sitting on these shutters, and the wonder is what you find to talk about all night,' she said briskly.

'Well, there isn't much else to do in this hole, is there?' said Robert, with a wave at the dim street.

'Oh no, of course not, and who took the Henry Piper's gate off its hinges?' said Mrs. Arnold, 'and painted "Come to Jesus" on Fledger's closet, and put a cow in the Baptist Church, and a nice mess it made being there all night, and eating all the Thanksgiving decorations.'

Mrs. Arnold, it seemed, found plenty to talk about in this hole. She had the gossip's underlip, trained and voluble.

'Oh no, that wasn't us,' said George, with a smile that deprecated vainglory at these dark doings.

'Oh no, and it wasn't Jerry either, and a job I had washing the smell of cow off his clothes with ammonia,' said Mrs. Arnold. 'But this won't get young Jerry his mixture. He's just getting over his croup nicely.'

She nodded brightly, as if that were an item to cheer their vigil on the shutters, and entered the shop, followed by the interested gaze of George and Robert. She was young and married, and possessed of maternal assurances of sex, and her dimples were very attractive. When she had departed, with a flourish of the mixture at them, George, the creature of uxorious fancies, admitted to some honourable emotion on her behalf.

'That's a little woman a man would do anything for,' he said.

Robert nodded assurance of a man's sentiments for that or any other little woman.

'That's a little woman,' said George austerely repudiating a metaphorical looseness, 'that deserves a better

husband than Jerry Arnold.'

'Oh, I don't know—they get on all right.'

'They get on all right,' admitted George, 'but does he treat her right? Out half the night, home all hours. Does in his coin as he pleases. Top of that, chases after any girl he has a fancy to. And a little woman like that waiting home alone in bed for him.'

'Oh well, a man must have his own life to lead,' said Robert, defending an article of faith. 'I wonder what girl Jerry's after now,' he added.

'I don't know,' said George shortly, and commenced to fill his pipe.

'The last girl he had was that governess that used to be at Harris's. Tall dark piece, with that way of looking at you as if you were a mile off.'

'That piece,' said George, astonished.

'It was always a wonder to me he wasn't bowled out over her,' went on Robert, 'because he used to meet her regularly in Harris's garden.'

'No!' said George.

'It's a fact, because Fanny Ellis was slavey at the Hinton's next door, and she told me she often saw him slip over the fence and meet the governess in the summer house. He's got nerve all right. Fanny told me she's often seen him walk up to the house and scratch on the window to call her out. Once he walked clean into the house, with old Harris and his missus seated in the front room, and came out a few minutes after with the governess.'

'He'll do it once too often yet, and get landed properly,' said George, obviously hopeful of such a Nemesis. 'If I had a little woman like Mrs. Arnold waiting at home for me I wouldn't go chasing round after other fellows' sisters, I wouldn't,' said George,

stirred by this honourable sentiment. 'Like to see Jerry Arnold chasing round after one of *my* sisters, that's all I can say.'

As George's sisters were distinguished for the homeliness of their looks, his threat of moral vindication on their account was a trifle gratuitous. But Robert, the pupil of Mr. Bandparts, chose to air an iconoclastic freedom from the prejudices of a brother.

'I don't see why a fellow should regard himself as responsible for a sister's virtue,' said he.

'Don't say that, lad,' said George solemnly. 'A chap's sisters are sacred.'

CHAPTER VI

I

MR. BANDPARTS' habit of reaching for his hat had been attended by some marked exasperations of late. Once, having achieved the hat, he threw it out of the window. After that, his resource of falling foul of the universe was too explosive for so small a parlour.

'Thunderbolts and tadpoles!' boomed the misanthrope. 'Aldermen and Apollo the bright and beautiful: mud huts and the topless towers of Ilium; the bathos of a crude duality; a pantomime side-show for the astonishment of yokels.'

He collapsed on the small sofa and cast an antimacassar on his head, a posture of crumbling dissolution in which his stomach refused to participate.

'And I'll tell you what it is, Piper,' he said, glaring out from under the antimacassar, 'there's been a colossal fraud perpetrated on us. It's called the enigma of the universe. It's a pretence that life is mysterious. It's nothing of the sort. It's a cheap concoction in Force plus Matter put together by a third-rate chemist, and annotated by a fourth-rate psychologist. There's nothing in it to discover. If there was, damme, I'd devote five minutes' thought to the thing and explode it for ever.'

'Buck up, J.B.,' said Robert.

'You presume to encourage me,' said Mr. Bandparts, becoming sardonic. 'The wraith of my imbecile youth annihilates time in your boots. I thank you. I bucked up prodigiously, on beer and servant girls. Continue, I beg, to anticipate the Nemesis of my terrible intellect by doing likewise.'

'Of course I know you are off booze,' said Robert, 'but don't you believe in getting hold of a wench now and then?'

'Mind your own dam' business,' said Mr. Bandparts morosely, and reached for a text-book. For the rest of that evening he taught with ferocious integrity. Nor did he round the function off in talk, but saw Robert perfunctorily off the premises and dashed back to the parlour again. Through the window Robert could see him snatch a book, open it anywhere, and read on implacably.

These were undoubtedly the resources of a desperate formalist, as the next evening's tuition admitted. There was a large jug on the table, and Mr. Bandparts, ensconced behind his pipe, smoked with a bland ferocity, which ignored Robert's inspection of the jug's contents.

'Beer!!!' exclaimed Robert.

'Pooh!' said Mr. Bandparts, and went on smoking.

'Beer!' repeated Robert, as one would say 'A reputation explodes here.'

'You are the slave of a monosyllable that has nothing to do with the matter,' said Mr. Bandparts. 'Look it up in the dictionary, and what do you find? A liquor extracted from malt and flavoured with hops. Rot! It is a tincture of eternity, extracted from light, and distilled by man. On the authority of Plato, it is that essence which holds the universe together. It holds us together. Whether you take it from the sun or a bottle is a mere pedantic idiosyncrasy. In either case, you take it.'

'But I thought——' began Robert.

'That I had repudiated any complicity with a vile intoxicant called beer. As a vile intoxicant I still repudiate it. That is, if you will insist on relating this

compound to the imbecilities practised on it by dictionaries. If that is the understanding, I retort in the idiom of vulgar philology, that I'm damned if I'll drink with you. As a tutor it is out of the question that I should invite a pupil to booze. As one component vibration in the essence of eternity to another I say simply, take a pull at the jug by all means. It is not to be supposed,' added Mr. Bandparts disdainfully, 'that I accept any responsibility for a system which connects your stomach with the electro-dynamics of eternity.'

'Here's to you, anyway,' said Robert, and took a hearty pull at the beer.

Mr. Bandparts assumed not to notice the action. He picked up a text-book and dictatorially announced the theme of instruction. When he had occasion to reach for the jug he did so as an abstract gesture detached from the practice of scholarship; when, having drunk, he placed the jug at Robert's disposal his intellectual preoccupation failed to note that pupil take a swig at it. Nevertheless, behind these pick-thank airs Mr. Bandparts was a mellowed man. He restrained an impulse to hum, his gestures were rounded, he no longer threw subject matter of discourse out of the window.

Study over, he rose majestically and put the empty jug under his coat. Disdaining Robert's attention he left the house—a stout gentleman, taking an evening stroll without his hat. Two streets away that impersonation was intruded on by the Farmer's Arms, a meek hostelry, with a dark side entrance. There the pretence of strolling deserted Mr. Bandparts. He lurked in at the side entrance like an assassin and emerged like one who has assassinated. But once safely back in the parlour the exultation of his eye was not to be disguised. Casuistry in the name of eternal chemistry was not

called upon to explain the baronial measure of honest beer he poured into himself before handing the jug to Robert. Breathing largely, like a prisoner who gulps the blessed air of freedom, he lit his pipe in haste to speed the debauch of talk.

In fact, emerging gloriously from behind the darkened simulacrum of himself, Mr. Bandparts betrayed an impassioned zeal in rediscovering his hidden profundities. He had himself out for a special analysis, which sought to explain why the gigantic identity of John Bandparts lurked in the impersonation of a school teacher instead of projecting itself at the earth with shattering effect. He assumed himself severely catechised by Robert on this wanton irrelevancy, presenting that pupil in the character of a ruthless cross-examiner.

'In short, Piper,' said the monologist, 'the question you thrust upon me is, "Why do I not work?" Why, you ask, with my profundity as a psychologist, my ruthless power of analysis, my ease in axiomatic definition, and my contempt for Man, do I not state in written words my vision of an earth stripped of illusion.

'Possibly, I might retort, in the words of Dr. Johnson, "Sir, you *may* ask." That would admit that I was not prepared to answer. It would announce that the bad conscience of sloth was at war with a magnanimous refusal to destroy the earth.'

He paused tolerantly.

'That, of course, seems to you an incredible undertaking. Pooh! A mere trifle. Every time a great intellect functions the earth is destroyed. That is to say, re-created. For what is an earth, Piper?'

He blew a cloud of smoke and passed his hand through it.

'There you have its exemplification, a shadowgraph

of vapour, penetrated by a single concrete element—*my Mind*. Within that vast area of consciousness which is *Me* the earth is encompassed; by its vaster radiations the earth is maintained in space.

'In other words, as I define my contact with this earth, Man becomes the automatism of that contact. How is this marionette jerked into action? By the impact of an idea. Tell him he is the elect of God, and he will burn and mutilate everyone who does not affirm that election; tell him that all men are born equal, and he will cut every throat that is obviously superior to his own.

'He is not concerned, you observe, to differentiate between right or wrong, or good or bad, in these disembowelling and throat-slitting activities. He is merely concerned to respond to any vibration which will give him a sensation of being alive, and he achieves that in the easiest way by killing something, by, in short, contrasting himself with something that is not alive.

'But as his ego can be so inflamed, so can it be depressed. To release the idea upon him drives him to cause destruction. Not to release the idea destroys him by the effect of inertia. Here, then, is the dilemma at which I stand. If I function as the projector of the idea, Man will seize upon it as a stimulus to cause some sort of uproar. If the Idea is sufficiently destructive he will become so actively high explosive as to detonate an atom or two, and then, hey presto—earthquake, cyclone, cataclysm, and the abyss.

'Why, then, release the Idea? Why, in short, destroy the earth? Possibly it is an absorbent for delayed vibrations which might otherwise fray off into space; possibly it is an essential continuum in Matter that might otherwise threaten the universe with a vacuum. That it

appears to function as an A.B.C. class for embryonic minds is doubtless one of the excuses for keeping it in existence. There, I will confess, it has been ingeniously contrived. I say this to you privately, for I don't believe in flattering the gods. Their conceit is sufficiently unbearable as it is. But they are clever devils, for all that. They have designed a system that always goes wrong in order to stir up a Utopian frenzy to put it right. By what it *is*, the idea is engendered of what it is *not*, by what it is *not* arrives the conception of what it *should be*. Thus is the infantile impetus of thought generated in the human biped.

'Nevertheless, my toleration for the gods ceases when I discover that their ingeniously contrived earth engenders Man on the principle of something that should be, and therefore is not. The earth is all very well. If it were only for the divine distillation of eternity in this jug I would be content to let it flounder eternally in space. But that I should commit the offence of giving Man a slippery foothold on matter is a thing outside the bargain even of my magnanimity. Here, then, denouncing my sense of humour, I say "This bad joke must cease." I say', thundered Mr. Bandparts, rising, 'that from the grand isolation of a self-created Hell I look down upon Olympus with contempt. I demand damnation as the just reward of my insensate pride. Here is my pen, there paper, yonder the earth. Within me, the Idea, a weapon against which even the gods are powerless, a poisoned dart to puncture man's Ego, explode the gas of self-esteem he calls his soul, and blow the earth to blazes——'

From an altitude of potent menace Mr. Bandparts leaped suddenly at the jug, thrust it under the table, and burst falsely into song. The door opened, and his little

mother looked in. She sniffed, too, comprehendingly, and fixed her son with a relentless eye.

'John,' said the old lady, 'you needn't hide that jug under the table, for I see it plainly.'

Mr. Bandparts, in some confusion, restored the jug.

'Ha!' said he, peering into it, as identifying its contents, 'A mild infusion of the herb called——'

'Beer, that's what it is,' said Mrs. Bandparts, 'and I see it's no use talking cocoa at *you* any more, though if young Mr. Piper would like a cup——'

'Pleasure——' began Robert, but Mr. Bandparts crushed his pupil's hat on and bustled him out. 'Time young Piper was off home,' he said, and so got them safely into the garden.

'Saved eternity a drench of cocoa,' he muttered, peering from behind the bust of Seneca to watch his mother retreat with an ominous head-wagging. Thus was he able stealthily to reach the jug through the window, and finish the beer in alternate gulps with Robert.

'Ha!' said Mr. Bandparts, with restored optimism. 'By a diplomatic measure of this sort we defeat the superior casuistry of the feminine mind. I never argue with women; they always win.'

He came forth without his hat to see Robert on the road.

'This', he said, 'is the hour of pure air; the noxious exhalations of human gabble are stultified in swinish slumber. The stars, you observe, still look down at us, a persistency I wonder at. Possibly the people who work these factories for the manufacture of electro-dynamics, for that's all the dam' things are, of course, are reprieved from boredom. Here,' added Mr. Bandparts, pausing before a small dark cottage, 'lives old Viddler, who plays

the church organ, a damnable instrument, fittingly consecrated to the God of Christians. I abhor this old man, not only because he is a Christian but because he plays Handel on the fiddle, which is to degrade the fiddle. Stand by while I ring his dam' bell.'

And thereupon did Mr. Bandparts knock up old Viddler with a tremendous racket and flee down the road with exhilarating speed. At the corner he pulled up to recover his breath and as an afterthought an effective parade of dignity.

'Piper,' said he peremptorily, 'go home.'

'Too early, J.B.,' said Robert. 'What about trying the Royal for a drink?'

'Piper,' said Mr. Bandparts, 'I observe in you a tendency to depreciate the status of preceptor to scholar. Kindly note that while it is strictly within the decorum of our special relation to relate problems in the higher physics to the contents of a jug, it is out of the question to assume any such conjunction with a common public house. Piper, good night.'

He stalked off with a stateliness of bearing which clearly rectified any slight discrepancy of that sort, while at the same time presenting any chance observer with the impersonation of a stout gentleman strolling late, without a hat.

Loath to admit the evening's entertainment over, Robert went and leaned on the parsonage fence. To the muzzy drumming of beer in his veins he gazed long and owlishly at the sombre cottage, possessed by the thought, as by a miracle, that several yards of ill-kept garden and a brick wall was all that lay between himself and a charming girl, plump, soft, and warm as a cat. For some time he dozed over a conviction that by powerfully concentrating his mind he might so impress

his will on hers that in a trance her form would flit across the garden to his arms. It was a pretty fancy, but somewhat baffled by the difficulty of concentrating one's mind when that organ is diluted with beer and the fatigue of frowning terribly—a facial contortion necessary to the conviction that one's mind is being concentrated. So enfeebling were these exercises that as an alternative to slumbering against the fence he gave them over with a yawn and staggered home to bed.

II

It was some days later that Millie came round the corner of Cassidy's Hotel to discover Robert lounging at the gate with Ruby Cassidy. That Millie should appear at the precise moment selected by Ruby with cow-like playfulness to snatch his hat off was the culmination of what Robert called his 'stinking luck'. Unable to raise his hat, that hostage of ill fortune being in Ruby's possession, he made some awkward evolutions in the shape of a bow which received but a distant response, and so the incident terminated.

On the way home he reviewed this exposure with exaggerated concern.

'I've done it now,' he thought. 'She won't look at me again,' and suffered all that evening from a conviction of exposure in the character of a detected vulgarian.

But feminine delicacy is not so easily discouraged. Glancing by habit from his bedroom window the following afternoon, Robert caught a flutter of white in the cape-broom and hastened there at once, to discover her seated on the tilt of an old dray, reading a novelette.

Neither of them was an expert at this sort of encounter, and there was some bungling in the way of affected surprise on both sides.

'Never expected to see you here,' said Robert.

'I came out to read,' said Millie distantly.

'I say, you never turned up that night.'

It was no part of his intention to burst upon her with a complaint, but the unpremeditated rules these encounters.

'What night?'

'That night at the Lake. I waited for half an hour for you.'

He had waited two hours, but vanity forbade the degrading admission.

'Oh, that night,' said Millie, affecting to recall a trivial occurrence. 'I couldn't get out that night.'

'I—I suppose you find it difficult getting out at night?' said Robert, crestfallen. Still, this eternal grievance of youth advanced them towards a better intimacy.

'It's not my mother so much,' said Millie. 'It's my father. He's horribly strict. He believes girls shouldn't be allowed out at all alone. Of course, since my sister—my sister got married, it's different. They watch you more——'

She appeared to hesitate, as though this confidence contained an admission. But Robert was merely interested in her communicative mood, not its communications.

'How many in your family?' he asked.

'Three, besides me. My married sister, she's in Broken Hill. Her husband's a mine manager. My eldest brother's a surveyor, in Gippsland. My other brother's in business in Melbourne. He's a year older than me.'

'You're the baby, eh?'

'Yes. I wish I wasn't, though. I think the youngest

in a family has a rotten time. Especially when you're the only one left at home. It's different when there's a crowd. There's more fun. When my sister was at home——'

Robert kept interjecting sounds, industriously keeping the conversation afloat on this arid stream of gossip. Gallantry here was the merest subterfuge. His thoughts darted persistently in search of an opening that might lead to subtler matters.

'I haven't seen your mother yet,' he said, for lack of something better to say, but Millie slid off that topic with a hint of reticence.

'Mother seldom goes out,' she said. 'She's an invalid.'

Robert tried to pump up an air of concern, but abandoned it without regret.

'Are you going to the tennis match on Saturday afternoon?' he asked restlessly.

'I don't know. Why?'

'It'll be worth seeing.'

'Will it?'

'Yes, there's a team from Ballarat coming out to play the crowd here. I say——'

'What?'

'Pretend you're going to the match and come for a walk with me instead,' said Robert urgently. He came close to her and leaned on the dray, watching her as she glanced indecisively about the paddock.

'Come on,' urged Robert. 'I'll wait for you at half-past two on the Hospital Hill. We'll stroll up Grub Gully way. It's very pretty along there and all that, and you'll enjoy the walk,' he added, with a belated deference to the proprieties.

'All right,' said Millie at length. 'I'll come, if I can manage it.'

'*You'll* manage it all right,' said Robert.

As a natural consequence of having arranged to conduct this interview with the strictest decorum, lest her delicacy be alarmed, he laid hold of her about the neck and kissed her violently. She turned her face away with a pretence of avoiding his kisses, so that most of them descended on her ear and neck. And she kept repeating with a discontented air, 'Don't, I wish you wouldn't,' without making any attempt to stop him.

So impolitic a procedure, in broad daylight, overlooked from half a dozen points of view, was at least a sensible excuse for cutting short these transports.

'I think you're very rude,' she said, and pushed him suddenly aside. Robert was instantly assailed by doubts. Could it be that he had overstepped the bounds of decorum in his ardour?

'Don't go,' he implored.

'I must,' said Millie distantly. She re-tied her hair ribbon, picked up the novelette, and walked towards the parsonage fence. But here, after a swift glance round, she smiled, blew him a kiss, and disappeared. Robert went home in a transport, and being then in a highly electric condition, punched some of the exhilaration out of himself in a sparring match with his pillow.

He prepared for Saturday's meeting by assuring himself at intervals that there was no chance of her turning up. This was subterfuge, to defeat the malice of destiny. His final preparations were hardly conceived in a spirit of pessimism, for they included a pair of white canvas shoes, flannel trousers, a starched shirt, and a red silk cummerbund in the approved fashion of that day's dandyism. To these articles of amorous intention was added his pocket edition of

'Don Juan', as a talisman against all evil. Thus adorned he reached the place of meeting a good hour before the appointed time, and there proceeded to grill in the fires of hope. With these agonies he endured the rasping of his stiff white shirt, that most damnable invention in discomfort since armourers ceased their trade in steel and iron.

It was a still, hot, cloudless day, when all distances shimmered and sparkled in waves of heated air. In that dry climate the heat was endurable and kept the pores in active operation. Below Robert the white roads and tin roofs sent up a blinding glitter, and the shrilling of locusts everywhere pitched a key of summer in his ears.

'She won't come,' he kept repeating, feverishly propitiating the malice of Destiny.

But Destiny, overcome by the heat perhaps, permitted her to come. The thrill with which Robert identified her stocky figure under a large straw hat slowly ascending the hill deprived him instantly of those faculties which make for graceful ease in the presence of the beloved.

He darted behind a bush, unable to decide whether his appearance should suggest the casually unexpected or the calmly prepared.

She, with more cunning, approached under the frank pretence of being unaware of his presence behind a bush.

The warm glow of reflected light, thrown up under the shade of her straw hat, the moist flush of her skin, and the summer freshness of her white frock so bewitched Robert that he could do nothing but grin at her like a fool.

'What a frightful hill,' said Millie, pausing for breath.

'It is a bit steep,' said Robert, propitiating her air of

discontent. 'But anyway it's quiet up here. Let me take your umbrella.'

'I can't stay very long,' she said warningly. 'I really oughtn't to have come at all.'

'Why?'

Millie shrugged her shoulders. 'I'm supposed to be at the tennis match,' she said. 'I'll be in a nice fix if father happens to call for me and finds I'm not there.'

'He won't do that,' said Robert reassuringly. 'Besides you can say you'd just left.'

'That's all very well, but he'd be sure to ask for me.'

She looked disparagingly at the township below them, shimmering in its mantle of heat.

'All right,' she said at length. 'But we'd better not go far. I shall have to be home early.'

III

As a girl matured in the terrors of her generation Millie had come prepared for an amorous lover. Her air of ill-humour was a precautionary measure. It was understood to announce that amorousness would be firmly repressed.

The success of the affair was naturally affected by these prearranged suspicions. They walked along the narrow path that led over the hill and down into the gully beyond, under the sun-splashed shade of gum and wattle. Conversation moved with difficulty, owing to Robert's preoccupation with the necessity of soothing her ill-humour. He spoke hurriedly, slurring his words, and leaving sentences to finish in the air. But his anxiety to propitiate her had the natural effect of stimulating an unbearable self-consciousness, so she complained pettishly of the heat and the flies and the length of the walk, and reduced Robert to the antics of an

obsequious dog.

On the steep gully side walking was a double labour, the flies were virulent, Robert's shirt-front was an oven, and even under Millie's muslin frock perspiration ran down the delta of her plump back in a continuous trickle.

'Where are we going?' she asked, jibbing capriciously in the descent.

'Well,—what about going down the gully, turning round by Chinaman's Flat, and coming out above the Lake?'

'Too far,' objected Millie, slapping at the flies with her gloves.

'It's no distance, really——'

'I can't stay out too long. I ought to be getting back now, as it is.'

'Oh, hang it, stay an hour at least.' His expostulation had a note of unconcealed anguish, and it was with the air of a confessed brigand that he lured and cajoled her as far as the gully's end. Here, in a glade of tapering bluegums, where the sunlight played hide-and-seek among the ferns and wild honeysuckle, he proposed to rest.

'Just sit down for five minutes while we cool off,' he implored.

With the air of yielding a point out of indifference, but not complaisance, Millie allowed him to prepare a seat with armfuls of bracken against a log. She seated herself with an air of uncompromising stiffness, arranged her skirts to show a minimum of ankle, and altogether refused to see the invitation of Robert's arm, placed along the log behind her.

'Lovely down here, isn't it?' said Robert.

'I wonder what the time is,' said Millie.

On these terms sentiment is apt to languish for inspiration. The mechanism of intimacy was here, but intimacy lingered on the road. Robert had supposed that it would follow the success of his embrace in the cape-broom, as a play follows its prologue, but here was the business still at starting-point. He lit a cigarette, furtively studying the petulant droop of her lip and the bored elevation of her eyebrows, in despair before her pitiless unconcern. By words, thought this incompetent, must the hearts of women be conquered, words, honeyed, cajoling, and of a sparkling wit. But wisdom is not always assured in its accomplishment. The heat, the flies, the time—by these conversational by-ways one may hardly reach the female heart.

'I say, you fond of books?'

'Yes, I like books.'

'Who—who do you like best?'

'Like who best?'

'I mean, who's your favourite author?'

'Oh, I like Mrs. Henry Wood.'

Robert was forced to admit literature a conversational dead end. Still, sitting in the bush with any girl must follow certain prescribed formulas and his arm, as an instrument dissociated from his intelligence, gradually encircled her waist. Tenderly, furtively, the action was accomplished, and might have remained successful but for the expression of Robert's face, abandoned to guilty premeditation. Millie gave over plucking grass blades to protest formally.

'I really must be going,' she said.

'Oh, hang it,' exclaimed Robert. 'We haven't been here ten minutes.'

'But you don't understand. My father——'

'Oh, he won't find out.'

'You don't know him. If he did——'

'He'll never know. Why should he? Stay half an hour longer. We can get back in a quarter of an hour, and it's a lovely afternoon. It's a pity to waste such a—to go clearing off before we've—I say, what lovely hands you've got.'

This digression, the effect of desperation, received some element of success.

'Don't be silly,' said Millie.

'You have. I love beautiful hands.'

He took this inspiring hand in his, seeking to imply a mere æsthetic appreciation. It was an ordinary girl's hand, plump, short, and without distinction, but an electric pressure made of it an exquisite thing. She let it remain in his, glancing away with downcast eyelashes. Robert studied her profile, with a hungry eye on the parted lips, the round chin, the fullness of her throat, and the pink lobe of her ear, stirred by a desire to explore these treasures with his lips. Impulse carried him to the act and he kissed her cheek. This was too swift an overture for feminine capriciousness, already in arms against a bungling lover.

'Don't,' she said pettishly.

'Don't what?'

'Oh, you know. I don't like it.'

But the clockwork was wound up and refused to stop. Robert kept a tight hold of her waist, striving to kiss her over the barrier of an interposing elbow. His hat fell off and it was only with a considerable display of exertion that he hauled her close enough to be kissed. She refused to respond, remaining stiffly in his arms, presenting her tightly closed lips to his with an expression of impatience.

'Don't,' she kept repeating between such intervals as

his kisses permitted. 'I think you're very bold. I wish you'd stop.'

'But hang it, I love you,' exclaimed Robert.

This was better, certainly, but his tone was rather that of expostulation than adoration.

'I love you,' he repeated, fired by this novel declaration. His fervour tempered her resistance appreciably. Still protesting her resentment she relaxed suddenly, as though her stays had lost the rectitude of whalebone. Her lips opened, her eyes closed; she turned her face to his tranquilly, refreshed and happy under this tender rain of kisses.

Robert was enchanted. At last he had got this difficult situation adjusted; at last he played the accomplished lover of his own ideal. He went on kissing her with unflagging industry, while she remained limply in his arms, in a species of satisfied trance. But caution kept a tentacle in action. Some furtive attention to the lace of her blouse brought her sleepy glance to rest on Robert's face, red with emotion, his hair disordered, and the message of his eye announced.

She gave a long sigh and released herself from his embrace, taking off her hat in order to arrange her hair. Robert made no effort to resist her action. Caution, too, of quite another order from hers, advised a restraint of transports for the present. He felt suddenly at ease, in the assurance of a successful lover.

'Don't put on your hat,' he said. 'You look lovely with it off.'

'Oh, go on.'

Her ill-temper had vanished. She turned her sideways glance at him with a softened emotion.

'You look lovely, anyway,' went on Robert.

'I suppose you say that to every girl you meet.'

'I don't know any girls.'

'Yes, I believe that. What about your affair at the public house?'

In the fervid accents of one who calls God and honour to witness the integrity of his heart Robert swore there was nothing in this base association. Millie received his protestations with tolerance. She did not believe them, but they implied devotion to herself.

They sat back against the log with Robert's arm now frankly admitted to her waist, where it remained glued the entire afternoon. Conversation flowed easily, released now from the intellectual pressure of necessity. If it lacked the inhuman quality of sparkling wit it contained at least the enlivening ingredients of gossip.

Robert listened with unaffected interest to her chatter about the family, the dullness of home, her last township, and her sister in Broken Hill, whose marriage appeared to have been solemnised under a cloud of suspicion for reasons not explained, but hinted at by references to the Rev. Kneebone's anger at its consummation.

The Rev. Kneebone, indeed, was presented as exhibiting in anger his chosen attitude in life. He stalked behind her simple narrative, a kill-joy parent, hasty, intolerant, keeping a special cane to enforce the authority of his sadistic God, whose creed was to thrust repressions on humanity as the Nemesis of being human.

There were intervals in these exchanges of prolonged embraces, indefatigable kissings and a good deal of fleshly disturbance on both sides, repressed by a timely return to cigarettes and gossip.

Her vigilance in this matter argued in Millie a reasonable experience of kisses. She had the ability at least to arrive from a condition of swooning surrender

to an appearance of perfect composure, as though her physical emotions lay wholly at the command of caution.

Indeed, she was at ease now, for the unknown quantity of danger was submerged in the familiarity of kisses. Her vanity was tickled, like her senses, by a lover easy to command, and command of Robert, of course, assured control of herself.

The Rev. Kneebone, that parental spectre, was somewhat exorcised in this conjuration, for it was close on six o'clock when they came out on the lake heights and parted among the pines.

Robert watched her hurrying figure till it turned below the hill, and, suffering a relaxation of energy, sauntered on the road home. Empty of emotion, he admitted a languid benevolence to all the world.

CHAPTER VII

I

ROBERT had a friend at the Melbourne University, with whom he corresponded industriously. This was his intellectual other half, a friendship which both saw preserved in the literary annals of a revering posterity. They wrote each other long inflated epistles of an astounding insincerity, inspired by a passionate self-adoration, which saw its wondrous content mirrored in a friend.

They wrote, in simple terms, as one great poet to another, exchanging poems, literary appreciations, and turgid observations on life and books with the assured air of originating profundities untouched by common thought.

They made no secret of the understanding that these letters would lay bare to posterity the intellectual shamelessness of two emancipated souls. It was a literary responsibility that Robert at least admitted by keeping copies of his own letters in a book labelled 'Letters to my Fidus Achates, 1896.'

So it followed that friendship, in common with posterity, should hear of his affair with Millie and the fragrant episode be insured for ever against the lapses of man's imperfect memory.

'I have, by the way, acquired a new amour,' wrote Robert to his friend. 'Charming of course, petite, and in fact altogether *très jolie*. Eyes sparkling, with a touch of the devil in them. Lips, rosy, ambrosial, and a leg—ye gods! I confess the classic ideal fails to hold me,

being cursed or blessed, with a touch of the blasé in my composition.

'I had met her, primarily, in the streèt. You know how the thing happens. A compelling glance of the eye, a witty remark, a smart rejoinder, some airy persiflage, and so one launches the affair.

'This afternoon, by arrangement, took her for our first walk. Had some doubts as regards rushing the affair, she being a cut above the average, as regards birth, bringing up, etc. However, the affair went swimmingly. I was in good vein, and in spite of some preliminary poutings soon had her quiescent in my arms. We lay, or rather half reclined on the sward, eyes closed, lips murmuring, passion gripping us by the throats. However, I am glad to say that I had sufficient strength of will to let the affair end in kisses. You, cynical old devil that you are, will smile at this, but after all such men as ourselves are apt to get a bit *passé* as regards the virtues. I am no saint myself, as God, or rather the Devil, knows. I have made good resolutions before, and, I confess, have failed to keep them. Women and drink have ever played the devil with me, and though, like you, I laugh cynically at the morality of parsons, I frankly admit to you, who, like myself, have experienced the fierce glamour of women, that I'm glad I spared her.'

This magnanimity, to say the least of it, was premature. It gratified some generous sentiment without involving the writer's sincerity. Already, in the unwritten diary of his mind, Robert had arranged to pursue the affair on lines of Oriental simplicity, and to find in it the fulfilment of all saturnalias of bed-time reverie.

Girls do not cut mental gasconades for the admiration

of a Fidus Achates. Feminine practicality hardly runs to the boastful humility of such exposures. But the sense of Millie's thoughts, as she hastily dished up a cold tea in the parsonage kitchen, would affect a trace of vainglory too.

'This is a nice boy,' she might have thought. 'His kisses are exhilarating; he has an electric eye. He is excitable, but not, I think, dangerous. Fortunately I am no fool about boys. This one has nice teeth, and he embraces with a disturbing rapture, but so long as I keep him at a proper distance and don't go walking with h.m at night there will be no difficulty in managing him. For I am a wise girl and know how to take care of myself.'

This, if not the form, was at least the tenor of her reflections. But as she sat opposite the Rev. Kneebone at the table the other half of her mind was active too, that half that is not vocal, but deals in the sensation of thrills and sighs and kisses, and the charm of being hauled about and tumbled in the grass.

Their glances across the church next day were charged with a secret assurance under the Rev. Kneebone's very beard—devotees to a hidden and mysterious goddess and of a religion somewhat older than Wesleyanism.

The parson, all unaware, dully pursued his calling, perched above the exquisite derision of their glances. He was a parent whose aspect denounced a rebellious humanity in children, and made it inevitable. His skimped allowance of grey beard was almost the colour of his skin, and his thin, peaked nose suffered a periodical twitch at the nostrils, which exposed his teeth and gave him the air of enduring a spasmodic irritation. He stooped, peering from under his eye-

brows with the suspicious expression of a modern parson, whose vocation has lost its significance and whose dignity is at the mercy of an indifferent generation.

The whole aspect of his presence was parched, meagre, and yet formidable. One might expect that fanatical excess which is the other extreme from emotional sensibility. These dry natures cannot expand: they can only explode. Corporeally, he stood between Robert and Millie, a parent of dark menace. Spiritually, he was as effective as a scarecrow in a black coat.

But at least he was able to put a strict embargo on Millie's leisure, and all they managed to squeeze out of his occasional absence were a few meetings in the cape-broom, a starveling allowance of kisses in a very ill-advised publicity. The situation was overlooked from the Piper kitchen wing; Peter and his friends played Indians there; the Rev. Kneebone might see them from his stable; and what was worse a more eminently inquisitorial eye lurked in the Piper fowlyard.

Uncle Jobson, prefacing the result of his observations with a crescendo of snorts, grunts, and glarings, delivered himself of this utterance at the tea-table.

'It's time I had a word with the Rev. Kneebone aboot ye I'm thinkin',' he said to Robert.

'What d'you mean?' blustered Robert in a panic.

'Ye ken well what I mean,' said the inquisitor. 'Ye're no for ever peekin' and dodgerin' about yon cape-broom for no reason, I'm well aware.'

He blew a trumpet call of warning on his nose and attacked his cold meat and onions with a palpable pretence of having finished with the matter, while Robert simmered in unholy rage.

'What does your uncle mean?' enquired Mrs. Piper at length.

'Ye'd better ask the Rev. Kneebone what he means,' began Uncle Jobson, 'no keepin' a better eye on——'

The imminence of exposure drove Robert in desperation to explode the affair.

'Good God!' he exclaimed. 'Can't a chap happen to speak to a girl without—without—without—what business is it of yours?' he shouted at Uncle Jobson.

Bearded for the first time in his experience by a nephew, Uncle Jobson's amazement almost obscured his anger.

'Is it to me ye speak?' he thundered.

Robert admitted the inequality of battle by throwing down his knife and fork.

'Tell him to mind his own dam' business,' he exclaimed, thrusting that onerous responsibility on Mrs. Piper. 'He comes sticking his blooming nose into everybody's affairs. I won't stand it.'

He weakened the quality of this defiance by dashing from the room, leaving a hubbub of voices behind him and Uncle Jobson to support the character of an outraged uncle.

Fortunately the matter was not investigated by family curiosity. It passed as one of Uncle Jobson's daily interferences. But in Robert's denunciation of the avuncular detective Grandpa Piper admitted a subtle partizanship. He did this by waylaying Robert in the passage and abstractedly pressing a shilling on him. Save as an expression of satisfaction there was no explaining so unprecedented an act.

II

But Grandpa Piper's conduct of late had been marked by much imponderable activity.

It was established as an undoubted fact that he had given sixpence to Peter. That he had patted Peter's head. That he had bestowed two acid drops and a dried fig on Hetty. That he had bestowed a fig on Peter.

Attention to one so unimportant as Peter could only have an ulterior motive, and a period of mysterious activity connected with a brown leather travelling bag disclosed it. The bag, packed, was carried secretly by Grandpa Piper to the fernhouse, and the motive of those courtesies to Peter there exposed.

Peter, at the moment, was recuperating from the intellectual tax of school with bread and jam. He was hopping, skipping and humming, as a stimulant to the joy of munching. From these employments he was suddenly distracted by Grandpa Piper reaching from the fernhouse like an aged bandit and dragging Peter into his lair. Whatever apprehension Peter may have entertained of a sinister intention in this act was dissipated by the gift of sixpence.

'This bag', said Grandpa Piper, as though he had just discovered it growing in the fernhouse, 'has got to go to the station. I wonder if Peter could carry this bag.'

Peter, it seemed, was equal to the task, and was for lugging his burden off at once through the garden, but Grandpa Piper hastily headed him off.

'No, no, my boy,' said Grandpa Piper. 'The back way—the back way is shorter.'

The back way was longer, but Peter, the price of whose soul was rather less than sixpence, took it willingly. The bag despatched, Grandpa Piper, with an assumption the most resigned from earthly things, emerged from the fernhouse, strolling. In the hall, by mere chance, he found a hat. Some vague connection between hats and heads made him put it on. In the same

process of abstraction he reached the front gate and issued forth, a good old man about to take the air.

If Grandpa Piper supposed the innocence of these proceedings effective he was mistaken. Hetty and Mrs. Piper watched them with a lynx-eyed understanding and before the ancient was well upon his road his way was blocked by Hetty.

'Where are you going, Grandpa?' she said.

Vaguely aware of an obstruction in his path, Grandpa Piper would have walked round it, but the obstruction most unaccountably insisted on walking with him. Peter, forging ahead with the bag, stopped to see the result of these manœuvres.

'Where are you going?' repeated Hetty, raising her voice. But sounds failed to pierce the density of Grandpa Piper's abstraction, engrossed with distant visions.

'Look here,' said Hetty sharply. 'You can hear perfectly well. I insist on knowing where you are going.'

A faint gleam of anger in the ancient's old black eye gave way to a sheep-like stare of wonder.

'It's never Hetty, surely,' said Grandpa Piper, affecting amazement at this strange encounter.

Hetty treated this duplicity with cold reserve.

'I wish to know where you are going,' she said.

The ancient soothed her with his hands.

'Merely going for a stroll,' he said. 'Strolling, strolling, merely strolling.'

He would have resumed this harmless remedy for the tedium of old age by walking round Hetty, but that obdurate grandchild refused to let him.

'You'd better come home, you know,' she said warningly. Density enveloped Grandpa Piper at the word. He was meek, he was submissive, but his density

was armour-plated. Hetty knitted her dark eyebrows, restraining an impulse to shake the obstinacy out of him by the ears.

Mrs. Piper observed these hesitations from the front gate, and beckoned Hetty to bring the wanderer home. Hetty shook her head impatiently. 'He won't listen to me,' she called. 'You'd better come yourself.'

Mrs. Piper came, and her air of smiling tolerance suggested that she, too, was merely strolling, strolling.

'Now, Grandpa,' she said, taking the ancient's arm. 'I want you to come home and have a nice cup of tea and some of that tea cake you are so fond of.'

If Grandpa Piper's air of resignation meant anything it announced that luxuries were not for such as he. He stood on the footpath patiently, forlornly, with the expression of a sad old sheep gazing at a distant mountain, allowing Mrs. Piper to exhaust her most honeyed tones in vain. To make matters worse, old Mrs. Robins and her daughters over the way had assembled in the garden as spectators of Grandpa Piper's obstinacy; the postman had stopped on his rounds for the same purpose; and old Sandy McTaggart, the publican, was frankly inspecting the affair through a pair of field glasses.

'Really,' said Mrs. Piper in desperation, 'your grandfather is very trying.'

'Wretched old man,' exclaimed Hetty. 'He's making us look perfect idiots, standing out here.'

Mrs. Piper beckoned Peter to her behind the ancient's back. 'Run down to the shop', she said, 'and tell your father, or Henry, to come at once.'

Peter, that turncoat hireling, dropped the bag and darted off at once.

Meanwhile Uncle Jobson had come into the garden

in his bedgown, with a red bandana handkerchief about his head. But newly aroused from an after dinner nap, his white hair and whiskers were disordered, his eye glazed with recent slumber, and his face like Dives that lived in purple, burning, burning.

Thrusting the unseemly disarray of this countenance over the gate, he divined instantly the nature of Grandpa Piper's passive resistance on the footpath, and burst forth at once, looking like an aged pirate in the last stage of moral indignation.

'Never tell me he's rinnin' off on ye after all!' he roared, inviting the neighbourhood to witness this family scandal. 'Man,' he shouted in Grandpa Piper's ear, 'have ye no sense or decency whatever; rantin' off on the randydan, ah ha! Ye would, ah ha! Ye would, ye would. Ye'd give us the slip, ye would, ye would. Ye—ye—bleezin' auld ediot.'

Unable to bear the scandal of this brawling Hetty walked back to the house. Such an exposure removed the outer skin of her endurance. Behind the spare bedroom window she suffered an agony of shame to the tune of Uncle Jobson's ranting and the spectacle of Grandpa Piper's hat, insanely immobile, above the churchyard fence.

But Nemesis was approaching the aged runagate, Nemesis in the form of an angry shopkeeper who feels that there is an intention abroad to rob him of his money. Henry's face was red with haste and rage, and his manner was that of a policeman about to arrest a notorious offender. Without a word he seized grandfather by the arm, wheeled him about and walked him back home at such a pace that the ancient's hat fell off and his feet were forced into a doddering run. The effect of this rapid motion on Grandpa Piper was de-

moralising. It affected his resignation as much as the dignity of his appearance. He sat on the front room sofa, where Henry had dumped him like a bundle of old clothes, glaring with the dumbfounded expression of one outraged in the accumulated tendernesses of a lifetime. His glare was mere aberration. It did not make a point of Henry, or the faces of Mrs. Piper and Hetty in the doorway, or even of Uncle Jobson's piratical bandana, but passed over each in turn with a sort of glazed virulence. It was absurd and uncanny, this senile rage, which made no other effort to express itself than preternatural glaring.

'You stay there,' said Henry brutally. 'You left the business in a nice muddle the last time you cleared out and it won't happen again. If you want to go on the jag do it on your own bank account, not ours.'

'Henry, Henry,' said Mrs. Piper warningly.

'I don't care, I won't have it,' said Henry. 'At his age there's no knowing what sort of a holy mess he'll be getting into.'

'Hadn't you better leave your grandfather alone for the present, to rest?' said Mrs. Piper.

'Well, keep an eye on him,' said Henry. 'There's the six-forty down this evening and he'll catch that if you give him half a chance. I know him.'

'Ye'll take my advice I think, and have away his hat and boots,' said Uncle Jobson from the door. 'He'll no go philanderin' in a pair of carpet slippers, in my opeenion.'

'I'm sure your grandfather had no intention of going away,' said Mrs. Piper, doing her best with the ruins of Grandfather Piper's dignity. 'He was simply going for a stroll.'

Behind a veil of diplomatic innocence she made some

urgent gestures of remonstrance, leading Henry from the room, and closing the door upon the moral dissolution of Grandpa Piper.

Left alone, the ancient still went on glaring, as though his expression of anger had become a fixture. It took in the furniture and ornaments with the same malignity bestowed on Henry and Uncle Jobson.

The discomfort of such concentrated venom was hardly to be borne. Amidst that crowded bric-à-brac it clamoured for relief, and in a fit of doddering frenzy the ancient snatched a vase from the mantelshelf and held it quivering aloft. A lifetime of caution and restraint hung suspended in that attitude of impotent fury.

But seventy years' indulgence in the unnatural virtue of resignation cannot be violated at last by the mere desire to smash a vase. With trembling haste, as of one who narrowly escapes a disaster, Grandpa Piper replaced the vase clatteringly back upon the mantelshelf.

III

Grandpa Piper may have been subtle, or he may have been the merest creature of habit. At least he appeared at the tea-table that night impenetrably disguised in his beard, baldness, meekness and density. If there had been a scene of intense disruption about him this afternoon he, at least, appeared quite unaware of it. If the family chose to hold a secret council in the drawing-room after tea what concern was it of his, this good old man, dozing upright in the dark outside the window.

The council consisted of Hetty, Henry, Mr. and Mrs. Piper, so that the social and financial aspects of Grandpa Piper were canvassed equally. The Grandly Moral was lacking in this discussion, for Uncle Jobson was in the fowlhouse, treating with kerosene that in-

firmity common to poultry known as 'scaly legs'.

Said Hetty, speaking as the member for Family Gentility, 'Father will simply have to put his foot down, once and for all. It's beyond a joke, leaving the responsibility to Mother and I. I simply will *not* be made another public exhibition of, like this afternoon. It's too humiliating.'

Said Henry, representing the financial aspect of Grandpa Piper, 'That's not the point at all. The point is this. Dad will have to make him sign over the business at—once.'

The responsibility, both financial and social, thrust upon him, Mr. Piper made an uneasy motion at the fireplace, as if about to measure it.

'My advice to you,' said Henry implacably, 'is to stand no more shuffling. Put it to him straight. Make him understand you mean to have the whip-hand from this on.'

'The situation is—is difficult. Difficult,' said Mr. Piper, baulking himself again in the direction of the fireplace.

'I'll tell you what the situation is,' said Henry ominously. 'Two thousand quid's worth of stock, monthly bills six hundred to keep it up. W.H. accounts for this quarter overdue and another three months' credit on a pro. note. That's what the situation amounts to. If you find the business landed in the mud don't blame me. I've no liability, thank goodness, and if things go bung I get out. Mark that.'

As a type, it was Henry's ability to thrust the Intolerable upon the Incapable without remorse. Mr. Piper darted at the fireplace and took its dimensions with a distracted air.

'I get out, mark that,' said Henry, and gave Mr.

Piper another spasm of the Intolerable.

As an antidote to the social and financial aspects of the Intolerable Mrs. Piper produced a little optimism.

'The best thing for you to do, Alexander,' she said smoothly, 'is to have a good chat with your father to-morrow morning. I'm sure, with tact, he could be made to come to some reasonable arrangement.'

Mr. Piper's countenance expressed no such generous conviction. He moved to the door, made some furtive movements of a measuring nature, and darted out suddenly with a shameless admission of relief.

'That's the old man all over,' said Henry, disgusted. 'No backbone. Hates bringing matters to a head. Well, I'll tell you what. If he won't do it I *will*, and that's the long and the short of it.'

In spite of that notorious deficiency in the matter of backbone, Mr. Piper managed, by a necessary process of desperation to corner his parent in the dining-room next morning. They were closeted there for an hour, though for any evidence of Grandpa Piper's active participation in the negotiations Mr. Piper might have been merely shouting a monologue on business matters by himself. He emerged from this performance and darted into the bedroom like a man who has now no further use for life.

'It's no use—no use whatever,' he kept repeating to Mrs. Piper. 'He simply won't listen.'

'But are you sure you made him understand?'

Mr. Piper rushed at the dressing-table, evidently in search of a razor.

'I tell you he *won't listen*,' he exclaimed.

'But really——' objected Mrs. Piper.

'Tut! tut! tut!' ejaculated Mr. Piper, touching Mrs. Piper's toilet articles in a frenzied manner. 'I

can't force him to listen if he won't listen. You know what he is. Takes no notice—pretends to be deaf——'

'He really is a trying old man,' admitted Mrs. Piper, perplexed.

'Trying!' exclaimed Mr. Piper. An adequate expression of the Intolerable failed him utterly. He took a scent bottle, two combs, two brushes, a hand mirror, and a pin cushion, laid them in a row, counted them, and jumbled the lot into a distracted heap.

'I give it up,' he exclaimed. 'If Henry thinks he can manage better, let him try.'

He ran out, touched all the hats in the hall stand, found his own, and pausing only to measure the width of the hall door fled to the shop, as a man flees to the whisky bottle, to drown his cares in the chief source of them.

'Really,' said Mrs. Piper, talking over the matter with Hetty, 'I sometimes doubt whether your grandfather is all he pretends to be. I mean,' she added, with strict impartiality, 'in regard to his deafness. He seems to hear, or not to hear, just as he pleases.'

'Of course he hears,' exclaimed Hetty impatiently. 'The wretched old creature. He's up to every move in the game.'

Mrs. Piper shook her head with honourable despondency. 'He really is very trying,' she said. 'We must see what Henry can do with him.'

Henry had no weak doubts about his ability to bring these impositions to an exposure.

He arrived that evening with a bundle of documents in his pocket, and the expression of a man prepared to exact submission, not as the price of justice but in retribution.

The dining-room was selected for this scene of

inquisition, Grandpa Piper led thereto by the arm, like a criminal, the door banged behind him, and himself thrust into a chair, to support the character of dummy to Henry's prearranged attainder.

'I want to have a good straight talk with you, Grandfather,' was Henry's artless formula for the prosecution. He slapped his documents open on the table and seated himself pontifically, with a certain imminent redness lurking behind the formality of his expression. Grandpa Piper, meek and humble, surrendered himself to these preparations, as one resigned to the wholly inexplicable. While Henry set out the financial grievance of Piper and Son, a statement threadbare with those abbreviations and formulas which are the poetry of business to commercial minds, the ancient sat benign and abstracted, nodding a soothing accompaniment, as to a strain of distant music, paying his grandson about as much attention as courtesy might bestow on the buzzing of a fly.

'Now', said Henry, when the firm's transactions, profit and loss, had been expounded to their final halfpence, 'there you have the whole situation, and I ask you, as a business man yourself, if you can expect us to carry on any longer in the dark. We don't know what the firm's capital is, and we don't know what you're doing with it. As you know, I'm drawing nothing but wages out of the concern, and I tell you frankly it's a position I'm sick and tired of. I can't hang on any longer on the off chance of getting a foot in on my own account, and what's more, I won't. Rather than go on any longer like this, I'll get out and make a start on my own account. The warehouse people know *me*, and would give me a shove for the asking. I've talked the matter out with father, and we've both agreed that

things must be put on a more definite footing. We run the show and we're entitled to a partnership interest. I put the matter to you straight, as one business man to another. Do the square thing and hand over the whole running of the business to father and myself. Of course, you'd come in on a partnership basis,' added Henry generously, 'but the active conduct of the business must be vested in self and father.'

Grandpa Piper went on serenely nodding, like an ancient automaton, whose clockwork has not yet run down.

'I may tell you I've had this proposition in my head for some time,' said Henry. 'I don't believe in beating about the bush. This is business. You can't carry on without us, and we won't carry on unless we get a fair return. There it is in a nutshell, take it or leave it. As one business man to another, I want a straight answer, yes, or—no.'

As one business man to another, Grandpa Piper presented an appearance of sheep-like vacuity. Considerably irritated by these doddering tactics, Henry reached over and gave him a jog.

'Here,' he said, 'you heard me. Yes or no.'

Grandpa Piper turned the glazed enquiry of his eye in Henry's direction and appeared to perceive a grandson present. In the train of thought engendered by this singular discovery, and seeming to infer from the presence of Henry some significance in the papers before him, began methodically to go through them. As each item was disposed of, he placed it in an orderly pile on one side, followed by Henry's expectant glances. The inventory finished, Grandpa Piper stood up, removed his spectacles, and replaced them carefully in his pocket. That done, he made a gesture as of benediction

over Henry and his papers.

'Very satisfactory,' said Grandpa Piper. 'Zephyr shirtings have hung fire. They won't pay at the price. Won't pay. Won't pay. Oxfords are safer. But on the whole very satisfactory. Very satisfactory indeed.'

And bestowing on the dumbfounded Henry a patriarchal gesture of approval he moved towards the door.

'Here,' shouted Henry, starting up. 'What about that deed of partnership?'

'Partnership?' repeated Grandpa Piper, in a fog of density. 'Partnership?'

'This won't do, you know,' blustered Henry. 'You can't put me off like the old man. I want an answer, and by George I'll have it. Now look here.' He swelled and reddened at Grandpa Piper with inflexible determination. 'You hand over a partnership or run the business without me. Understand. Partnership, or—*Out—I—Go.*'

He flourished that menace beyond an appeal of density by hammering it out on the table. Grandpa Piper appeared to divine the nature of all this agitation with a special effort. And divining it, he seemed to become older, feebler, and more world-weary, to lavish upon Henry, as a gift, the assurance of his meekness, his baldness, his beard and his resignation.

'No hurry about that, Henry,' he said. 'No hurry whatever. No occasion for alarm at all.'

'But there is,' shouted Henry. 'It must be settled, at once.'

What more could a good old man do, whose meekness is repudiated by a rapacious grandson? Grandpa Piper seemed to give up the unequal struggle. Nodding and doddering, he reached the door, and repeating mournfully:

'No hurry—no hurry. Plenty of time—time—time,' drifted in a crumbling state of resignation from the room.

With his florid capacity for swelling and reddening, with his eyes starting and his fist raised in imprecation, Henry was left to present very creditably the aspect of a baffled draper. He made an offer at the lamp, as at a missile, gave that up for some hissing teeth-grinding expressions of fury, and finding no relief in these exercises stamped off to the kitchen, where Mrs. Piper was going through the week's washing.

'But I'll settle him yet,' he exclaimed, after an explosive account of the negotiations. 'I'll go to town for our summer buying myself and see the wholesale people, and I'll get Uncle Fred to put the whole thing in legal form, and by thunder I'll see that the old driveller signs it, if I have to sit up all night to make him do it.'

'Yes, yes, Henry,' said Mrs. Piper, with a glance at the housemaid. 'Don't speak quite so loud. The servants can hear you.'

The character of a baffled draper was one that Henry suffered with difficulty. He swelled and reddened and thumped desks in the interval of exacting reprisals from Grandpa Piper. Where family matters impinged upon the sacredness of business Henry had no use for reticence, and ground his teeth with honest rage at the ancient's appearance in the shop.

'Look at the old devil,' he would say to Hodson, the cutter. 'Catch him miss a banking day. He hasn't got an eye to the main chance, oh dear no. You'd think he didn't know "b" from a bull's foot, but just watch him cast his sanctimonious old eye over the cash takings. But I'll rattle him up yet—I'll——'

In the shop, at least, there was no secret made of the

fate reserved for Grandpa Piper. Was the ancient aware of such irreverence in a grandson? If so, his humility was a mask against detection. He mooned about the house, begirt in density, offering only as a reproach the submission of his meek bald head and the benediction of his presence in the act of merely standing.

If he had a predilection in this occupation it would appear that he favoured the kitchen for a prolonged assumption of the upright posture. Here, among the wash-tubs, or crowded into a corner between the oven and the dresser, he would stand motionless, permitting no clatter of kitchen pots to disturb the intensity of his abstraction.

'It's no place for him at all, at all,' old Bridget might exclaim in a moment of exasperation. 'For there he is, sez you, standin' over agen the flour bin this hour, an' me with a pudding to make, let alone his coat-tails dribblin' in it this minnit, and him all white with the flour, a ditherin' old man, sure an' all.'

'It's not our business to complain,' the housemaid might say with asperity. 'If he likes to stay there, let him. He's not doing any harm.'

But Mrs. Piper found the family dignity concerned by Grandpa Piper's presence in the kitchen, and not infrequently led him forth by the arm.

'You cannot expect the servants to respect you, Grandpa,' she would say in reproof, 'if you are forever in the kitchen.'

But this was too mundane an aspect for Grandpa Piper's simplicity, who received it with his eye on distant visions. That one so old, so meek, so bald, so bearded, should stand among the wash-tubs was surely the evidence of his submission to an unjust fate.

CHAPTER VIII

I

THE financial agitations of Piper and Co. were no affair of Robert's; he had other matters to think of. His affair with Millie was proceeding on the convention of irritation kept active by more potent repressions, and his presence outside the parsonage of an evening had become something of a penance. He neglected Mr. Bandparts to spend hours lurking about the fence like an uneasy ghost, terrified of a penalty for haunting.

Within the house Millie was kept at the same pitch of nervous tension that drew her at intervals into the garden.

There was a corner of the parsonage hedge where they exchanged hasty kisses through the leaves, stimulants to an invitation that was frankly desperate.

'Any chance of getting out to-night?'

'No hope. Father's in the study.'

'Oh, blow him. Can't you slip out for half an hour?'

'What's the use? I'd be missed at once.'

'Say you want to change a book at the library.'

'Mother hasn't finished the last yet. Besides, father wouldn't let me.'

'Blast it, don't you ever get a chance to get out?'

A further note of desperation was added to these interviews by an unrelenting suspicion in the Rev. Kneebone. He had a stealthy habit of sudden appearance, extremely disconcerting to a prowling lover.

Once Robert was kept for half an hour lying prone behind the hedge, while on its other side a silent figure

stood in carpet slippers, listening for a recurrence of suspicious sounds. On another occasion, while Robert was peering through the backyard gate, the Rev. Kneebone, standing on a box, was peering over the fence at him.

'What are you doing there?' said the parson finally, in a tone of such hollow menace that Robert fled in disorder. He hoped the darkness had hidden his identity, but the incident discouraged him for some time. When at length he met her by chance on Saturday morning in the street he was not above allowing her to partake of some misanthropy at these proceedings.

'As far as I can see,' he said, 'you don't want to come for a walk.'

'I do,' said Millie, troubled at his gloomy expression. 'I'll try and get out to-night.'

'You will?' said Robert distrustfully.

'I'll do my best. I'll have to say I forgot the groceries.'

'Good,' said Robert, a trifle heartened. 'I'll wait at the Lake Gate at half past seven.'

On Saturday nights the shops remained open late, and the town was grateful for one night of bright lights. Everybody flocked to the main street, which became a promenade of wit and appearance. Girls walked arm-in-arm, assuming the exchange of licentious secrecies as an encouragement to youths who stood about the gutter and who might, or might not, be induced thereby to violate feminine privacy. Carts and buggies lined the kerb, belonging to country people who had driven in for a festival of booze and shopping. The Salvation Army brawled with wilful optimism in the centre of the road, testifying the existence of a low-comedian God to a mildly derisive audience, who were grateful even for this parody of an entertainment.

Robert sped beyond the range of bright lights, winged with prearrangements for a night of love. He took his stand at the Lake gates and gave Destiny its orders in explicit terms.

'She'll dam' well have to come,' he kept repeating, letting it be understood that he had had enough of extra mundane fooleries in frustration. These incantations were successful. Before his vigil was well commenced he saw her hurry past the bridge lamps with a sense of pleasure that must have reached the stars.

'My goodness,' she exclaimed breathlessly, 'I'm sure I saw father up the street. I believe he's following me.'

'Not him,' said Robert, soothing this obsession. He took her parcel of groceries as a hostage and led her along the dark pine avenue. Here Millie paused, glancing about with a worried air.

'We won't go any further,' she said. 'There'll be a row if I'm late. I really can't stop too——'

'Look here,' exclaimed Robert, 'what's the good of coming out at all——?'

'It's not me. But I'm scared of my father. He——'

'Oh, blast him. What can he do? What does a row matter anyway? If you cared for me you'd tell him to go to hell. As far as I can see, you don't care.'

'What's the good of getting cross?'

'What's the good of coming out at all? I've been hanging round your place for the devil's own time, like a blooming fool. You said you'd come for a walk to-night, and now you want to clear home at once.'

He turned his shoulder to her, kicking the turf and muttering, an exhibition of temper that surprised her into contrition, and with a cajoling air she put an arm round his neck and kissed him under the ear. The sensation of this embrace was novel. Hitherto Robert

had made all the overtures, and he softened perceptibly.

'You don't care,' he said, repeating the success of his indifference.

'You know I do,' said Millie, repeating the success of her submission.

Under the pines submission and indifference melted into an embrace, in which the groceries participated. Robert forgot his grievance, forgot the groceries, forgot the formulas of a calculating lover. To Millie the Rev. Kneebone was suddenly diminished in importance, like a man seen through the wrong end of a telescope. They had caught life at an opulent moment, when that wanton surrenders a divinity to the sense of touch. The tree trunk against which they leaned became the pivot of the universe, beyond which the night made unregarded noises. Along the lake paths a group of youths and girls passed, giggling and talking. Down by the creek an orchestra of frogs serenaded the stars. The township sent up a sound of footsteps, voices, and a distant clamour of Salvation Army music; the shuffling of humanity beyond the spell of Hyperborean kisses.

Robert broke this enchantment suddenly with a voice that stuck in his throat.

'Come on,' he said. 'Let's get further along. There —there's no sense in standing here.'

Millie hesitated, admitting in her reluctance a very accurate desire. Robert sought to lead her by the waist, encountering the irresolution of her body.

'Come on, Millie,' he pleaded. 'Come just a bit up the hill. People can see us here—besides, I want to smoke——'

Millie glanced doubtfully at the dark invitation of the pines, weighing hurriedly the axioms of caution.

'I—I don't know,' she said weakly. 'I think we

ought to stay here.'

Her voice sounded frankly a note of regret. While they stood, hesitant and embarrassed, the Lake gate clicked, admitting a tall figure outlined against the halo of light from the bridge. Robert's preoccupied glance fell on this advancing form and jerked a sound of alarm out of him.

'Cripes! Here's your old man,' he said.

Millie made a panic-stricken dive for the tree trunk but Robert hauled her away under the pines.

'It's all right,' he whispered. 'He can't see us. It's too dark.'

They vanished with the celerity of cats, while the Rev. Kneebone, that unwitting instrument of fate, pursued his stealthy course along the avenue.

Blessing his good fortune, Robert hurried Millie up a winding path that led to the Lake heights. He did not speak for fear of starting protests at this dark itinerary, but she came silently and a little breathlessly, glancing behind her, as if for a spectral parent in pursuit.

Robert knew these paths from childhood and led her to a special pine tree, whose low-growing branches swept the ground. These he held aside, ushering her into a dark sanctuary resinously scented and thickly carpeted with pine needles.

'We're all right here,' he said, carefully depositing the groceries. 'Couldn't be seen a yard off. Why, *I* can't see you.'

She was kneeling beside him. He put out a hand, and received her weight suddenly in his arms. Her face came against his neck, and there remained; he could hear the sharp intake of her breath, and feel her body drained of resiliency. One of her arms found its way under his coat and its plump warmth through the thin

lining of his waistcoat thrilled him strangely.

This swift admission of emotion also confounded him. He was about to premeditate the convention of a struggle which might, or might not, terminate in an embattled posture of two lovers, but her pose of submission lost the predatory male his cue for action. He could feel her lax mouth and closed eyelids against his cheek, and her body limply surrendered to the discretion of his muscles.

'Comfortable?' he whispered at length.

She did not answer. He shook her gently, but without response. A suffusion of emotion had got into his throat, and he was forced to gulp at articulation.

'I say, Millie,' he whispered huskily.

She remained mutely insensible. Robert recalled her aptitude for sudden trance, and was bothered. It placed the adventure of love at an inert ravishing. Was this feminine casuistry, this supine pose, which left all responsibility to him? Possibly it was shyness; possibly it was a genuine swoon, a thing outside Robert's experience of feminine tactics.

Experimentally he unbuttoned her blouse, but the intrusion on its privacies was not resisted. Still, inspiration was begotten by the tender caress of breasts. He began to kiss her, and a responsive shiver enlightened him. This pacific pose was her admission of desire, the mute offering of her body to love. Disturbed and charmed, Robert possessed her. It was a jumbled, unarranged consummation, but it was divine. For the first time in his experience, a girl had conceded her body to a need as frank as his own and he was filled with a surpassing tenderness for this generous and adorable girl.

'Millie,' he said at last, in the interval of peace earned

by happiness, but for the moment she was voiceless. 'Millie,' he repeated in her ear, 'I love you—I love you.'

Suddenly, in the dark, her arms came round his neck and held him tightly. Complicity was admitted; after that they were at ease as lovers.

II

It was close on eleven when Robert and Millie approached the parsonage that night, and they walked slowly, like people whose destination is a matter of indifference. From the battered parcel of groceries under Robert's arm a thin dribble of sugar marked the trail of their footsteps. His other arm was about Millie and at intervals he swung her off the ground in a thrill of exuberance. At the corner below the parsonage they paused; the note of their voices subdued, intimate, masonic.

'I've never met a girl I like so much as you,' said Robert. 'You're just my sort.'

'Really?'

'You are. You appeal to me. You're just the girl I've been looking for.'

Millie emitted a plaintive sigh, relaxing gratefully in his arms.

'I hate going in,' she said at length, 'but I suppose I had better.'

'I hope you don't catch it too badly,' said Robert, with belated concern.

'Oh, I'll catch it all right. There'll be a holy row. I wonder what I'd better say?'

'Say you got reading a book at the library and forgot the time.'

'You don't suppose father hasn't been there half a dozen times looking for me. I bet he's been nosing all

over the town. No, there's nothing for it but to say I've been for a walk by myself. He won't believe it and there'll be an unending row about it. Oh, what do I care? I'm sick of worrying about rows.'

She patted her hair into some sort of order, tucked in her blouse and flounced her skirts like a soldier overhauling accoutrements before going into battle. The groceries changed hands and Robert, with a benediction of tenderness, saw her as far as the parsonage fence and hung about for some time, expecting to hear some terrible explosion of anger from the Rev. Kneebone. But brick walls were a screen for the parental prison house, and he walked off at length towards the main street, obeying an impulse to consecrate this night to gaiety.

A few last shops were closing in the main street, and a few people still loitered outside the public-houses, with voices raised at intervals in tones of drunken argument. On the baker's corner he came upon George and Jubber who found themselves greeted with extravagant gaiety. To George, in particular, were these transports directed, he being seized about the neck and himself cast into the gutter.

'Steady, dam' it,' protested that friend, rescuing a trampled hat. 'What's bitten you?'

'Just feeling a bit good,' said Robert. 'Come and have a drink.'

A certain depression in George and Jubber vanished at this proposal, for gaiety must wait on beer lest beer be dishonoured. The Royal Hotel was closed but they entered by the back way, to find the darkened bar still plying trade and Arnold in the parlour with Cummings, the new bank clerk. As a new-comer in the township, as a cit, and a devotee to beer, Cummings

was hailed with interest in Robert's circle, but a chronicler may stand excused if he is passed to the reader as a tall, canary-coloured youth, wearing his hat awry, his hair neatly disordered, like Hamlet's stocking, to mark his pose of dissipation.

'Fill 'em up, Bill, and have one yourself,' said Robert to the barman.

There was a response at once; the company drew in round the table, pipes were lit and a sense of pleasure was established at a stroke. George, a pertinacious creature where his curiosity was excited, called attention to Robert's exuberance in explicit terms.

'Million to one', said he, 'you've had a girl to-night.'

'Get out,' said Robert. 'What makes you think that?'

'You're so dam' pleased with yourself,' said the wiseacre.

Robert exhibited for the occasion an unusual discretion.

'No, George,' he said, 'I haven't so much as seen a girl to-night. I just happen to feel like making a night of it.'

He was permitted to fulfil that desire, as something agreeable to the general inclination. A part of its performance very much later took place in the band-stand, in the form of an impromptu concert, which ended in a smashed gas lamp and a final scatter for home.

Robert crawled through the window at length and sat for some time in the dark, to assure himself that the house was undisturbed. With his candle lit, he remained picking at the grease, in a boozey effort to recall something forgotten. He was sitting up in bed, his hair ruffled and his face red with the stir of drink, when recollection returned with the force of an illumination.

'Millie!' he said, and hit the bed a blow of congratulation. A smile of maudlin satisfaction took possession of his features, suddenly replaced by an air of resolution.

Reaching across the table, he grasped a pencil and the first book to hand, as one whose inspiration cannot wait on orderly expression. Brilliant ideas crowded upon his mind, images of splendid passion clothed in majestic and sonorous words, like the sound of distant bands. He scribbled with haste, lest Inspiration, that slippery dame, should fly out of the window and a great lyrical moment lose its reward.

Slaking our love with kisses long,
Our souls afire with love,
We burn in passion fierce and strong
Reckless of hell beneath, and heaven above.

In passion's mould our limbs are cast,
Our burning heartbeats tell
Of desires fierce as the fiery blast
Blown from the mouth of Hell.

The grandly demoniac appeared to explode suddenly. From a brief doze his muse emerged in tenderer mood.

Ah, dearest, could passion thus smoulder
And the hours of eternity pass.
With you, reclining on my shoulder,
Myself reclining on the grass.

Inspiration, at that, went out suddenly, like a straw fire. His eyes closed, the pencil slipped from his fingers; in a second he was asleep, leaving exposed to the solemn inspection of the candle these thanksgivings for Life's magnanimity—a gift of girl.

III

The dusk had fallen, but the Rev. Kneebone, in an old pair of carpet slippers, went on watering his flower beds. He was no gardener, but the occupation

was an excuse to keep an eye on Millie, who leaned on the front gate in an evening mood, pensive and vacant. At intervals, without turning her head, she stole a cautious glance past the church front, beyond which could be seen a strip of churchyard and a portion of the Piper house.

Worried by mosquitoes, Kneebone put up his hose and stood for some moments eyeing his daughter distrustfully.

'Millie,' he said, 'you are not going out to-night.'

'No, father.'

'Understand me, Millie, you do not leave the house.'

'No, father.'

The parson stood, rasping his whiskers, dissatisfied at these formulas of submission.

'Millie,' he said at length, 'you had better come 'nside.'

'Presently, father.'

'At once, Millie.'

'Very well, father.'

She came inside, a pattern of docility, and drifted slowly down the passage to her bedroom. The father watched her out of sight but remained for some time at his study door, narrowly eyeing the passage. A querulous voice from the front bedroom appeared suddenly to express a grievance.

'Am I to spend my entire existence in the dark?' enquired this voice, dolorously.

Kneebone paid no attention to its complaint. Satisfied on the score of his daughter, he lit a cheap tin lamp and at a loss for employment stood gaping about the room. It marked the habitation of one unaware that existence could be decorated, the eye saved offence, and the backside discomfort. The chairs were of horsehair

and stung like ants, the pictures steel engravings of defunct parsons, happily defiled by rust spots, and the bookcase was piled anyhow with gritty volumes of that terrible species of literature which the trained observer shudderingly averts his gaze from in secondhand bookshops.

Kneebone picked up the 'Christian Herald', but without looking at it sat frowning and listening. The house was still, save for an intermittent mumbling from the front room. This silence disturbed him. He put down his paper and tiptoed down the passage till he could peer through the door jamb of Millie's bedroom. He darted in, and stood flouted by an impudent open window. Twitching all over, in a St. Vitus spasm of fury, he ran out of the house without a hat, taking the back way by which his daughter had gone. In the failing twilight, which turned all shapes grey, he went swiftly down the flat peering right and left for the flutter of Millie's print dress. At the gas-works he paused, for beyond lay the diggings, a treacherous pathless world of old holes, mullock heaps, rubbish tips, and hovels of the Chinese camp.

Crouching in a hole, Robert and Millie watched the lank figure pass.

'All serene,' said Robert. 'We'll get across to the Red bridge now, where he can't follow.'

He slipped an arm round her, and in the motley gloom they picked a way among old shafts and tailings with youth's cat-like indifference to a dangerous pathway.

An hour later Kneebone entered the parsonage and dropped on the study sofa with a groan of exhaustion. His sallow face glistened with sweat, his mouth hung open, and his whole lank figure wilted under extreme

fatigue. It was a moral collapse, too, this supine pose, which left him for a period vacant and inert, convinced of impotency.

It was the fourth time since Millie had come home with a damaged parcel of groceries, that she had gone off in defiance of his orders, and he understood that this was inspired rebellion; she had a lover.

He sprang up and commenced to prowl the verandah, perversely forcing fatigue on his trembling joints. Always his eyes searched the darkness with a fixed glare. This soft summer night was in league with a salacious earth: everywhere there were sighs, murmurs, a whispered licentiousness, the interlaced bodies of lovers. The penitentiary will of God was repudiated, for lust refused to be strangled.

He still moved restlessly back and forth when the gate clicked at last, and Millie walked up the garden path with premeditated composure. The sight of her father sent a thrill of fear down her spine—the mechanism of childhood's beatings and repressions.

'Come here,' he said, and led the way to his study. She followed meekly and stood before him with a downcast expression, examining her finger nails. Her hair, thick and heavy, tumbled from recent embraces, fell over her eyes, and on the whiteness of her throat was a clear red mark, the seal of an impetuous wooing. Young, sturdy, and vital, she stood before the meagre presence of her father, united to him by a freak of blood, but divided by a world of secret thoughts.

'Where have you been?'

'I went for a stroll.'

'I told you not to leave the house.'

Discretion left the statement unconfirmed. Cramped in his narrow soul, like a man in a hair-shirt, Kneebone

had no means of extorting truth but by the thumbscrew and the rack. He grasped his daughter's arm.

'Did you hear me tell you not to leave the house?'

She nodded.

'Then how dared you disobey me?'

This crucial point remained unanswered too. He shook her angrily, with a rising fury.

'Must I thrash you before you will understand that I *will* be obeyed—that I will not have you running wild in the streets at night? Who have you been with to-night?'

'Nobody.'

'Don't lie to me—don't lie to me,' he exclaimed, exasperated. 'I know—I know.'

For a moment Millie looked him in the face.

'I've been with nobody,' she said. 'I went for a walk by myself.'

'A lie!' he shouted. 'You meet some skulking fellow. You go the same road as your sister. I'll have no more of it. I'll throw you out, vile—godless—heartless——'

He grasped her other arm, shaking her violently, digging his fingers into her yielding flesh, stiffening his muscles against the tender contact of her body. His eyes were fixed, seeing a vision of more potent lusts.

The front bedroom door opened noisily and there was a rickety crash, of a cane chair upset, and Mrs. Kneebone lurched across the passage and achieved the support of the study door, where she stood blinking and nodding, a fat and slipshod old woman in a teagown.

'What a preposterous uproar,' she said in a tone of refined protest, which came with an effect of conscious satire from her bibulous face. She made no attempt to focus her attention, but let her gaze wander in amiable vacancy.

Kneebone released his clutch on Millie and for a moment was unable to control a St. Vitus paralysis of his mouth. Millie remained with her head averted, refusing to acknowledge his foolish effort at chastisement. Neither paid any attention to Mrs. Kneebone, who managed to reach the sofa with a calculated lurch and there sat nodding and smiling at a tolerably imbecile world.

'Of course, I am aware that I am a person of no importance,' she said. 'None whatever. A mere cypher. At the same time, not being a cat, I object to trying to read in the dark.'

The objection was not acknowledged. Kneebone found his voice with an effort and made a threatening gesture at Millie.

'Understand me,' he said. 'You've had your warning. Go to your room.'

Millie escaped with a sigh of relief. The novelty of such retribution was losing its effect. Freedom was easy after all, paid for by a silly uproar of anger and abuse.

His daughter gone, Kneebone took his wife by the arm and offered mutely to assist her up.

'Quite so,' said Mrs. Kneebone, nodding affably, but making no attempt to rise. 'I am quite aware that I am no fit object to be seen. Oh, don't apologise, my feelings do not matter in the least. At the same time, sitting in the dark is not amusing. As a mere human being, of no importance whatever, I object. There may be no kerosene in the house or no candles. If there are they are not for me, it appears. Others are permitted lights of every description, while I am supposed to conduct my entire existence in pitch blackness——'

She rambled on with mechanical good humour, the

parody of what had once been a good-humoured woman. Her features had been crudely handsome, too, like Millie's, but booze had splodged their outlines.

Kneebone stood waiting till her drunken monologue should run its course. Set in a normal mask of gloom, his face refused to acknowledge a special emotion on his wife's behalf—a retort that stirred her to truculence, though she went on smiling with obstinate malice.

'The Rev. Kneebone is permitted to have a lamp,' she said, nodding at that article. 'The immense importance of his studies demands it. I should be the last to protest, I am sure. As his mere wife, I should be sorry to deprive him of it. Heart-broken—absolutely——'

With a drunken laugh she picked up the lamp and pitched it at the wall with a crash of splintered glass. Kneebone darted at the blazing wick and blew it out, stamping desperately on the spattered drops of blazing oil. In the dark a pungent smell of singed carpet and hot metal filled the room as he shuffled about searching for matches.

'Frightfully sorry—sample—sitting in the dark,' said Mrs. Kneebone in a relaxing voice.

A match flamed and Kneebone reappeared lighting a candle. Putting this out of his wife's reach, he resumed his abnormal passivity at her side. This sullen refusal to accept the challenge of anger had its effect. The artificial remains of good humour were dissipated, leaving her tremulous and subdued.

'Fetch the light,' she muttered. 'I want a drink.'

Kneebone picked up the candle, and steadying her unwieldy figure guided it out of the room. Through the bedroom door he could be seen rigidly holding the candle, refusing otherwise to countenance the clink

of glass and bottle. That conjunction ratified by Mrs. Kneebone's stomach, he came away, taking the candle with him. The act was an announced precaution in the house, for Mrs. Kneebone had already nearly burned two parsonages in moments of drunken abstraction which doubtless masked a little subconscious wit at their expense.

In the study he seated himself with a groan, jerked out of him by a collapse into fatigue. It rendered him immune for a period from the attack of thought, and he remained vacantly absorbing the narcotic of tiredness. But an obsession cannot be stilled for long, even by aching joints. A sound of creaking springs from Millie's room, as she settled into bed, brought his brows together in a scowl. Again, the image of a salacious earth rushed upon him, where girls walked lewdly before the race of prowling youths, offering their bodies to be shamefully handled, their ears to obscene talk, their minds to prurient corruption. Again, unable to sit still, he began to prowl the room, resisting at every turn an impulse to reach the passage. But reached it was, by the volition of an intention not to be defined. On tip-toes, holding his breath, he crept to Millie's door, and there stood listening, striving to detect the sound of her breathing. It seemed to him imperative that he should know she was there, though he knew she was. Only when he heard her turn in sleep, with an impatient murmur, did his vigil suddenly relax, bringing him hastily and furtively back to the study.

Meanwhile, a hundred yards away, the chronicler of a salacious earth made a record in his diary:

'Met her, as usual, down the flat. Had a chase from old Kneebone. We hid, hooking it across the diggings. Went down under the Red bridge. Mosquitoes pretty

bad, etc. Did a little sentiment. Damn it, I feel greatly in love. She tells me her old man leads her a devil of a life, always growling, etc., never allowing her out. She does all the housework, never so much as thanked for it. Damned unjust. The old woman, it appears, gets on the tank. Want to take her to the tableaux next Saturday, but the old man won't let her go. Damn.

N.B.—Promised to say nothing about the old woman boozing, etc., as she is ashamed of it.

(Reflection.) What right has that parson to pronounce judgment on others for the so-called "evils," who, as the case proves, cannot keep his wife off the booze. So much for religion.'

CHAPTER IX

I

'I EXPECTED we'd have trouble with Mrs. Widdleham and her mob,' said Hetty as they walked home from a rehearsal. 'You were quite right putting your foot down on their objection to outsiders.'

'Nuisances, these local duchesses,' said Niven. 'Live under a sort of children's party rules.'

He had chosen 'Faust' as the spectacle to be presented by dramatic gesture to the town of Redheap, and was now aware of social niceties of precedence only to be found in country towns and Royal Courts.

'I suspect the Arnold youth is the chief cause of annoyance,' said Hetty. 'The Duchess Widdleham objects to acting with a bicycle-shop keeper.'

'Sorry, I'm sure,' said Niven, bored by Mrs. Widdleham's presumption. 'Arnold is a perfectly presentable youth.'

'D'you know, I find him quite intelligent,' said Hetty, mildly surprised at her own lack of prejudice. 'I'm beginning quite to like him. After the way the others muddled through their parts I thought he did his scene with Ethel remarkably well.'

'I find him passable,' said Ethel, appealed to for an opinion. In spite of some alarmed protests she had been cast for the part of Marguerite.

'Our Ethel has the right colour,' had been Niven's explanation of this preference. His manner towards

Ethel seldom got beyond this species of good-humoured tenderness, as though it were understood that a direct address would startle her unduly.

The truth was her shy air of secrecy made him a little doubtful of his cherished self-possession. In spite of his composure, his well-cut clothes, and all the other props of dandyism that implied an assurance in the presence of women, Ethel's manner gave him a disconcerting sense of being outside the circle of her interests. If by chance he caught her fleeting glance on his he was disturbed into self-consciousness by the clarity of her eyes, apprehensive yet shallow, like water which reflects but has no depths.

With Hetty there was no call for spiritual afflictions of self-esteem. She courted his attention frankly, or, rather, innocently. Within the prescribed ritual of a sex-terrified era, she did her best to buy his masculinity with her charms. But both she and Niven were practised in the gestures of social ease and that made a genuine contact difficult. She might lead him to the piano by the sleeve, hold a match for his cigarette, lean at an angle that let him glimpse the plumped division of her breasts, settle his head on a cushion, or brush cigarette ash from his waistcoat, but this would be in the flippant assurance of the drawing-room, with its dumbfounding bric-à-brac and its door always half open to the hall. Besides, the blinds of the French windows were seldom lowered. Opportunities for better intimacy were needed, and neither had the enterprise to make them.

Niven, of course, often dawdled mentally over the possession of Hetty, but where the tacit understanding of love implied marriage he preferred to dawdle. As it was, he maintained a discreet liaison with one of the

hospital nurses, but that was so clearly understood by both as a rationality between two professionals, and was so well managed, that even the other nurses did not discover it.

In the meanwhile, he liked Mrs. Piper's dinners, he liked lounging on the Piper verandah, he liked talking to Hetty, and he liked looking at Ethel. Outside his professional interests at the hospital, the production of 'Faust' just then occupied his mind to the exclusion of either.

As a conscientious stage manager, he had announced the date of his performance with misgivings. There had been need for some alarm, for his company, already agitated by the problem of social precedence, had been disrupted by those emotions of jealousy, hatred and abnormal vanity which naturally attend the minor drama. Mrs. Widdleham, for instance, buttressed by a fortune in Berry Consols, Peter Widdleham, M.P., and the largest mansion in the district, had lived to have it suggested that those dignities should be presented to the public carrying a bucket to the village fountain, and had carried her patronage forthwith out of the concern. The Misses Ponsnit, daughters of old W. P. Ponsnit, the estate agent, were two other intellectuals who found their position menaced, for if old W.P. himself was in a constant state of being brought home incapably drunk that was no excuse, it seemed, that his daughters' place in the drama should be technically admitted as 'On with the mob.'

Cummings, the bank clerk, in addition to supporting the star part of 'Faust', had also been allotted the job of property master, a business which kept him going round like a hawker, borrowing chairs, draperies, fancy dresses, lanterns, pots and bottles; even a stuffed

alligator was promised, for the laboratory scene, an article without which no alchemist may ply his trade. The local carpenter and tinsmith came under his instruction, and thrust upon the Drama some historical inaccuracies in the matter of tin helmets, swords and halberds.

As an actor Cummings was less happily employed. He had habits obnoxious to a classic reading of his part, and had to be widowed of a predilection for expressing all emotion by staggering and grasping at his brow with the frenzied expression of one who has forgotten an engagement.

'I wish to God I'd given his part to Arnold,' said the aggravated Niven. 'He acts like a perfect barnstormer.'

'I think he's improving,' said Hetty, 'though the Arnold youth certainly would have been better.'

Hetty's misgivings of this youth had been greatly softened by discovering that at close quarters he was mild, decorous, and polite. Social formulas were a trifle disconcerted by the fact that he made no effort to encroach upon them. Besides, he was undeniably good looking, played his part of Valentine with assurance, and disappeared the moment a rehearsal was over. To Hetty alone he tempered this reserve of manner with a certain practised deference which Hetty chose to comment on favourably to Ethel.

'He may be a devil of a fellow among the barmaids and servant girls,' said she, 'but really I find him quite inoffensive.'

'Really?' said Ethel with an unexpected sneer. 'I'm surprised that you should think a bicycle-shop keeper could possibly be inoffensive.'

'What do you mean by always insinuating that I'm a

snob?' exclaimed Hetty angrily. 'I judge people by their manners and intelligence. I care nothing for their social position.'

'It's just as well,' said Ethel cynically. 'They can't all keep drapers' shops, of course.'

'Your temper's becoming abominable since these tableaux started,' said Hetty. 'You were distinctly rude to Niven this afternoon when he told you to throw yourself across the body of Valentine. Besides, it was a slight to Arnold. You ought to have had the sense to know it was only in the part.'

'Damn!' said Ethel impatiently. 'I know what to do when the time comes. I hate this rehearsal foolery; going on with a lot of asinine antics before that silly crowd.'

'There you go,' said Hetty. 'I don't know what's the matter with you, I'm sure. You seem to be in a constant state of irritation over something.'

Deleted of a sisterly extravagance, this statement was in a manner true of Ethel's conduct at rehearsals. The drama, it is admitted, imposes a strain upon the nervous system. But in the artificialities of her part Ethel was sufficiently at ease; only in the more difficult rôle of life she exhibited embarrassment. Outside the business of her part she stood about the wings, shy, silent, and defensively reserved, very discouraging to the social amenities.

'You look for all the world as if you expected someone was going to insult you,' said Hetty. 'Heaven knows, I loathe people who make themselves cheap, but I think you carry these prudish airs too far.'

Ethel wrinkled her nose without committing herself to a defence of these strictures.

II

Niven's company of amateurs emerged from a late rehearsal in the Town Hall, chattering and laughing with the assured air of people already dedicated to publicity. There was no one in the quiet street to be impressed by these graces, save a little group of lads at the chemist's shutters, who looked on with derision at these pretenders to the drama.

Niven, about to see Hetty and Ethel home, stopped under the hall's gas lamps for a word with Cummings and Arnold.

'You think you can manage those steel swords all right?' he asked the latter.

'Oh yes, they only need a couple of wires from a battery attached to the hilts.'

'Good,' said Niven. 'I've got the loan of three first-rate set scenes from town and I want you two to come across to-morrow afternoon with Mullins and help to set them up.'

'That's your job, you know,' said Cummings with an aggrieved air. 'We've only three days left and I haven't half the props in hand. There's something fresh wanted at every rehearsal.'

'Why don't you make a complete list?'

'I've got one; a yard long. Makin' lists is easy. The trouble is to get hold of the stuff. There's that brazier——'

'Three tripod legs and an old pot—holes punched in it,' said Niven, relapsing into boredom.

'Why not come along with us and talk it over at supper, Mr. Cummings?' said Hetty, soothing these dissensions.

'Thanks,' said Cummings, moving with alacrity in

Ethel's direction. Niven turned to say good night to Arnold and hesitated. There was a perceptible shuffle of self-consciousness through the others, admitted by an impatient movement from Ethel and a belated air of graciousness from Hetty.

'You'll come too, Mr. Arnold?' she said.

'Thanks,' said Arnold, 'I'm afraid I've got an appointment.'

'Quite sure?' said Hetty, relieved.

Arnold appeared to be quite sure. He stepped aside, giving the others an opportunity to depart without compunction. They split into couples as they went, Niven walking with Hetty and Cummings making off with Ethel. Arnold hesitated for some moments, gazing after them. His face was not a mobile one, but his olive skin took on a darkened tone, his black eyes contracted, and he spat derisively in the gutter. In that mood he approached the shutters, whereon sat Robert, George, and Pincher, prepared to exhibit humour at the expense of dramatic pretensions.

'How's the bum drama goin'?' they asked.

'How's Niven, the Limelight King?'

'Oh, dry up,' said Arnold morosely.

He sat down on the shutters, drummed his heels and dissociated himself from them with a depressed expression.

Pincher went on with a story, interrupted by his arrival.

The boredom of country towns, like that of ships at sea, makes raconteurs of necessity. But Arnold got up, disparaging the humours of life on any terms.

'Coming?' he asked, nodding at the Royal Hotel.

The others followed and were presently grouped in the parlour, with the precedent for gaiety at hand. But

gaiety lingered at the call of beer. A certain moroseness attended the gathering, due to the persistence of Arnold's moodiness. Without being demonstrative, he managed to exert a certain malice, with the air of one who seeks an opportunity to quarrel.

The Post Office clock marked the hour of two as they turned into the street, which echoed like a vault to some hollow attempts at exuberance.

Behind locked doors the race of shopkeepers slumbered, temporarily released from the cares of money-grubbing. The smug frontages entrenched behind a barrier of shutters aroused a vindictive longing in Arnold's mind. He wished to disturb the repose of these tradesmen, to stir them up, like a hive of bees, in order to enjoy their buzz of anger. Adventures did not come to one in this hole of a place. Here, to experience the spiritual thrill of danger, one must be at the double labour of inventing a cause for it, to manufacture the expected in order to capture some charm of surprise.

They stood at the Town Hall corner, debating the town's meagre promise of entertainment. George was for going home. He frankly objected to disturbing the community at the expense of personal danger. Pincher, in the character of a village Panurge, proposed breaking into the Town Hall and stealing the Council's whisky. There was a way in under the stage, he said, at the mere expense of bursting a cellar door open. George, in the character of a man of honour, would have none of this proposal.

'Not for me,' he said firmly. 'I call that sort of thing downright burglary.'

'Come off,' said Pincher, amused at extravagant expressions, and a fresh argument started, in which the

element of 'sport' was upheld against a cantankerous assumption of rectitude. But George persisted, refusing to sully a conscience as yet free from the stain of theft.

'Apart from the fact that it's bloomin' well thieving,' said the moralist, 'there's the danger. All very fine, no doubt, nippin' whisky, but you get copped. What happens? Gaol, and your bloomin' reputation's done in for good.'

'You're a sausage,' said Arnold. 'There's no more danger in walking into a strange house than walking into your own, as long as you know the way.'

'I call that absolute rot,' said George.

'All right,' said Arnold. 'There's Mutch's over the road. I'll break in there and collar a tin of biscuits to prove it.'

'Collar a bottle of whisky, too, while you're about it,' urged Pincher.

'Don't be a dam' fool,' said George angrily.

They moved across the road, even George, in spite of his protests, admitting a thrill of pleasurable excitement. In the dark façade of the grocer's shop Arnold took off his boots.

'Oh, dry up!' he said to George's final warnings. 'Keep quiet, or you'll wake old Mutch.'

They watched him from the lane go over the grocer's fence like a cat. Thence they returned to the entry, and with ears pressed against the shutters, listened for what infinitesimal sounds might penetrate the silence of the shop. For what seemed an interminable period nothing happened. The illusion of strained attention alone made them fancy the sounds of cautious movements behind the shutters.

Then, without warning, there burst upon this state

of suspension a crash, as of a tin rolling from aloft, and upon that an instant silence.

'Keep still, blast it,' whispered Pincher, restraining an impulse of panic in the others.

In the entry they waited with senses stretched to record the exposure of this midnight alarm. It came, almost at once, in a glow of light, filtering the darkness of the shop, and shooting silver streaks between the shutters. Through the cracks they saw old Mutch appear in his nightgown, holding a candle. His long, lugubrious face with its red fringe of whisker wore an expression of strained expectancy, like one who fears at any moment to tread on some horrid thing.

For a long time he stood in his bare feet, peering and listening. A cake tin lying on the floor attracted his attention and he picked it up cautiously, as though it were liable to explode. Still dissatisfied, he commenced poking about behind the counter and the piles of biscuit tins and candle boxes on the floor. Then he said 'Shust!' loudly, with the air of one who defies a cat.

These precautions availing nothing, he stood for some time scratching his whiskers and rubbing his bald head before he resigned himself to a spectral disappearance, haloed by a receding candle. The silver cracks vanished from the shutters and again there was silence, darkness, and amazement.

'Well, that beats me,' said Pincher. What became of Jerry?'

'He must have got out first.'

'He couldn't, old Mutch came through the back way.'

'Well, he wasn't in the shop.'

'Well where the devil was he?'

They were still agitated over the mystery when

Arnold suddenly appeared from the lane, carrying a biscuit tin and two bottles.

'Here, take these,' he said. 'Where's my boots?'

'Where'd you get to?' demanded Pincher.

'I was in the shop, of course. Couldn't get out.'

'But where, damn it?'

'I whipped up the shelves and hung on there. If the old fool had looked up he'd have seen me. Lucky he didn't; I'd have had to drop on him. What did I get? Beer?'

'Beer?' said Pincher derisively. 'Have a look!'

'Vinegar!' ejaculated Arnold with disgust.

He took the bottles one after another and smashed them against the grocer's façade. With a vigorous kick the contents of the tin were scattered over the footpath, paving it with cracknels at eighteen pence a pound.

Robert made no effort to investigate this foolhardy expression of annoyance. He fled with George round the baker's corner, and together they bolted for the Grammar School playground and hid behind the school. And here, while they recovered breath, they held some sober conversation about Jerry Arnold.

'Fun is fun,' said George, 'an' actin' the goat's actin' the goat, but burglary's a bit over the odds.'

'They go too far, those two,' said Robert.

'Any more of it and I chuck going with Jerry Arnold. For why? Because he's one of those cows that haven't got any sense of responsibility. Put any mad idea in his head and he'll do it without hesitation. I'm on for fun with any man, but burglary, and then advertising it, is dam' foolery.'

'Foolery,' affirmed Robert. 'Now, the only thing I believe in taking risks over is a girl.'

'Depends on the girl,' said George, becoming morose. 'Damned if I seem to be able to get hold of one these days.'

Robert smiled tolerantly on this confessed incompetent.

CHAPTER X

I

THE night of Niven's production of 'Faust' found his company of amateurs in a proper state of exhilaration, and the two small dressing-rooms down a flight of stairs from the wings hummed with preparation for the grand moment of an ascending curtain.

It was a midsummer night; the heat of gas was added to the heat of humanity; mediævalism in tin armour cooked in a dressing of grease paint and perspiration, yet all were fired with self-esteem, and supported these burdens without discomfort.

The scenes were set in the wings, and left a minimum of space for breathless amateurs. Mullins, the local carpenter, hovered about an arrangement of coloured flares with the desperate expression of one who commits to memory interminable calculations.

Niven darted everywhere, dressed from head to foot in scarlet. His thin features suited the convention of Mephistopheles, and a saturnine make-up added greatly to his present expression of exasperation.

'Look here,' he said to Hetty, 'I can't paint all those infernal women. I've done the men, and I've got the flares to look after. That idiot Mullins has got them all mixed up and he's set the gauze curtain wrong. Besides, the first scene isn't half complete yet, and on top of all, that ass Cummings has come without his beard for the first act. I've sent a boy for it, but heaven knows if it will arrive in time.'

Arnold, in doublet and hose, with a cocked plume in his black velvet cap, was at Hetty's elbow.

'I'll paint the women if you like,' he said. 'I'm not a bad hand with grease paint.'

'Do, for God's sake,' said Niven, and darted away to put Mullins through some lightning calculations. Cummings presented himself from behind a scene with the expression of an ill-used man. He wore his alchemist's gaberdine over a brilliant costume of blue tights and slashed doublet, and he scowled at Niven's back.

'It's all very well', he said to Hetty, 'callin' a chap an ass because he forgets his bally beard. I'd thunderin' well like to know where this show would be without all the work I've done for it. I had to carry that bally alligator up myself; the dashed thing weighs half a ton. And the trouble is I'm responsible for breakages. I wish I'd let him look after the bally props himself.'

Hetty soothed the malcontent. 'Never mind, Johnny,' she said. 'We all know you've worked like a horse.'

'I say, you look ripping in that costume,' said Cummings, appeased. 'Where's Ethel?'

'Down below, dressing. She's always late.'

'Crowd's rollin' up all right,' said Cummings, peeping through the curtain. 'The house is nearly full now.'

The audience, as expressing impatience, had already begun stamping and whistling in the back seats, where the youth of the township were packed like herrings; the orchestra was busy tuning up under the command of old Viddler, and Niven, with an anxious glance at his watch, signalled for the overture to commence. Selections had been taken from the opera to follow the drama's action, and the performers stirred emotionally in the wings at the tap of the conductor's baton.

The overture gave Niven a brief period for some final instructions to Mullins. He was alarmed now for

the success of his performance, and spoke with nervous energy.

'Remember now,' he said, 'the light must come gradually off the gauze, so that the audience can just dimly make me out behind it. Keep the red screen on till Cummings starts back, and then whip the gauze up at once. There must be no hitch, remember.'

With a dazed expression, Mullins hinted that man, under pain of intellectual annihilation, could but do his best.

'Them lights is me main trouble,' he said. 'Managin' them and the gauze instantaneous is no joke, with on'y a single pair o' hands.'

Cummings, whose beard had arrived in time to take part in the performance, put a match to his Alchemist's brazier. Lined with green paper, it lit up the beard with an unholy radiance.

'Here's the red flare for your transformation,' said Niven to the Alchemist. 'Have you got the magnesium in your goblet? All right. You know where to throw it down, here. I've marked the place. The puff of smoke goes up where it falls. It'll just give you a few seconds to slip your beard and gown. Don't bungle it.'

'I can assure you', said Cummings with dignity, 'that I've got the bally thing worked out to a mathematical certainty.'

'Glad to hear it, 'm sure,' said Niven coldly.

A burst of clapping put the seal on these final injunctions. Niven darted to his place behind the gauze screen. The performers crowded breathlessly in the wings. Cummings seized a glass pipkin and assumed the crouching aspect of extreme age. The lights went down, the stage became suddenly spectral, lit by a greenish glow. The orchestra struck a solemn bar and

the curtain went up.

Arnold had been standing back in the wings, scanning the bunch of performers with a preoccupied air. He turned now and slipped softly down the dressing-room stairs.

In the ladies' apartment, amidst a disorder of bags, baskets, and dresses, stood Ethel, touching her lips delicately with a scarlet pencil.

Her hair was done in two thick plaits, which fell on either side of her face, making a frame of gold that was youthful and barbaric. She wore a chaplet of small blue flowers, and her mediæval dress with hanging sleeves fitted her body like a glove from hip to shoulder. Mrs. Piper had expressed disapproval of this dress, viewing the frank admission it made of Ethel's breasts, but without otherwise protesting Ethel had insisted on wearing it.

She turned now on Arnold the exotic brilliancy of her young painted face. In his black tights and nodding cock's plume he stared back at her with a peculiar air of hesitation.

'Can I be of any use?' he asked politely.

'It's all right,' said Ethel. 'There's no one here.'

He cast a hurried glance up the stairs, stepped in, and caught hold of her with a laugh.

'Mind!' said Ethel, with a cautioning gesture.

'No danger. They're all upstairs.'

Ethel dropped against him with a feline wriggle, and they remained for a moment smiling at each other with satisfied eyes.

'What a peach you look,' said Arnold.

'Do I?'

'Do you? Have a look at yourself.'

He turned her face to the mirror, placing his face

alongside hers in order to enjoy the possession of this charming girl in a novel setting. Ethel, too, studied their faces in the mirror with a critical appreciation.

'You look rather well yourself,' she said, smiling at his reflection.

'Dash this grease paint,' said Arnold. 'Whereabouts is it safe to kiss you?'

Ethel took his face between her hands and advanced her lips cautiously.

'There's a stage kiss,' she said. 'I can't have my make-up ruined.'

'Be hanged, that's no sort of a kiss. Give me a proper one.'

'All right,' said Ethel, yielding. 'You'll have to do up my lips again.'

She put her arms round his neck, charmed by the innovation of painted kisses. Upstairs came a burst of clapping, and the orchestra in the full tide of a scenic effect.

'There goes Henry Irving Niven in the great transformation act,' said Arnold. 'There's no hurry yet. Give us some more grease paint. I like the taste of it.'

Ethel glanced at the mirror.

'What a mess you've made of my lips,' she said.

'All right. One more and I'll do them up again.'

A practised habit in the art drew their faces together in a prolonged kiss, like a sustained note of music. Ethel relaxed with a laugh, to draw breath, and in that act pushed him roughly off with a startled expression.

Arnold restrained an impulse to look behind him, aware by her alarm of a presence there. Instead, he picked up a stick of grease paint.

'You want a touch more under the eyes,' he said politely.

Ethel stood helplessly while he made some pretence of doing up her eyes, which remained fixed on Hetty in the doorway.

'I think that about does it,' said Arnold, turning to discover Hetty with a reasonable show of surprise. But Hetty's glare pulled its assumption to tatters. She stepped in between them with an expression as pointed as an insult.

'This is the ladies' dressing-room,' she said rudely.

Arnold's hardihood deserted him. He dropped the grease paint and stooped to recover it with a flush of annoyance.

'Eh, quite so,' he said. 'I came in to finish doing up your sister.'

He stood hesitating, loath to leave the situation in an attitude of ignominious retreat. But Ethel had turned to the mirror, hurriedly dabbing at her lips with rouge, and Hetty's domineering glance left him no option. He turned and walked out, a fresh burst of applause mocking his exit. On the stairs he vented disgust at this exposure in a furious blow at nothing. In the dressing-room Hetty gripped her sister's arm with a gesture as furious as his own.

'Explain yourself,' she exclaimed.

'Explain what?'

'You know what. He was kissing you.'

'He was not.'

'He was. I saw him.'

'You must be mad.'

'I tell you I saw him.'

'Shut up—people are coming.'

A clatter of footsteps on the stairs caused the sisters to separate with a glance of exasperation. The prologue was over and a rush of excited amateurs, seeking

baskets, flowers, pitchers, swords and halberds dissipated this minor drama in the dressing -room. Hetty went upstairs, her virago instincts burning for expression. In the wings she passed Arnold with a black disregard. Like most self-willed people she had very little self-control. But there was no opportunity here of easing her outraged suppressions. Niven and Cummings were setting the next scene, assisted by the perspiring Mullins. They were all at a high pitch of nervous exhilaration and darted about with the compact air of men working against time. Mullins alone exhibited an artist's satisfaction at his initiation to the drama.

'Them flares went off lovely,' he kept repeating. 'I had 'em timed to the second.'

The minor performers crowded in the wings in an electric condition, for this was the scene of their first entry. Ethel came up from below and took her station for an appearance through the church porch. Arnold, awaiting his cue, stood in the wings, bothered by an anxiety to have a private word with her.

'All ready,' said Niven, and signalled for his orchestra to begin.

Hetty stood in a dark angle of the wings, suffering a badly stifled emotion which she mistook for anger. In the dressing-room she had been frankly furious at the discovery of Ethel as a licentious minx in the embrace of a married man. She had not hesitated at the revelation of their intimacy; they were lovers. The shock of that knowledge was one of self-exposure, for Hetty was a virgin. She had even missed a premature initiation to love by the secret curiosities of childhood. Now, as her eyes followed Arnold and Ethel about the stage, two beautiful creatures in an artificial setting of light, she

experienced one of those time-annihilating emotions which stranded her in a loveless earth, where there never had been lovers and never would be. Her throat was contracted, her breasts strove against the enlacement of her stays, she was about to weep. From that paroxysm she returned suddenly to the reassurance of anger. Her generation never questioned, at least, its right to penalise love. Now the glance which followed Ethel and Arnold was justly vindictive.

On the stage Faust and Mephistopheles played a mimic serenade beneath Marguerite's window. To them entered Valentine, unmasking his sister's lover. There followed the duel, effective with sparks from the sword of Mephistopheles, the defeat of Valentine, and the flight of his murderers.

A trifle breathless from his exertions, Niven joined Hetty in the wings. The success of his show was established, and repeated bursts of applause had unsettled his composure.

'It's going splendidly,' he said. 'I never thought it had half a chance, really. But rehearsals are no test. This scene is really very well set.'

The stage was darkened to represent night, and Valentine lay dying to slow music at the church cross. From behind emerged the watch, with lanterns and halberds, to find the prostrate Valentine. At their gestures of alarm the townspeople entered, forming a respectful group for the entrance of Marguerite. Ethel had changed her blue dress for a white garment, and made a virginal appearance in the church doorway. That mysterious light from aloft, which haloes leading persons of the drama, was thrown upon her as she ran down the steps, kneeling before Valentine with gestures of alarm and entreaty.

'Very well done,' said Niven, with managerial satisfaction. 'Our Ethel is a distinct success.'

Hetty's emotion escaped her in an exasperated sound.

'Oh, very,' she said.

'Eh, what?' said Niven, surprised at her tone.

'I'm not at all pleased with our Ethel,' said Hetty, controlling her voice. But the desire to explode her discovery refused to be controlled. It suddenly presented itself as a theme in intimacy with Niven.

'I'm not pleased with that youth either,' she said. 'Arnold, I mean. I caught him kissing Ethel in the dressing-room.'

'Ethel?' said Niven, astonished.

In an angry whisper Hetty repeated the story of her discovery, while Niven, with a disturbed expression, kept his eyes fixed on the stage group.

'Are you sure?' he said at length.

'I *saw* them.'

Niven clicked his tongue, with a conventional sound of consternation. On the stage Marguerite had thrown herself across the body of Valentine, who cursed her with his dying breath. The orchestra played a mournful cadence, while the townspeople drew aside, leaving the two tragic figures for a final tableau.

'What did she say?' whispered Arnold.

'She's furious.'

'Rotten luck! Stick to it that I was only doing you up.'

'But she saw!'

'Don't matter. Stick to it. Can I see you to-night?'

'No, no——'

'I must. As soon as I'm dressed; I'll wait outside.'

'There'll be another row.'

'No matter. You aren't in the last act. Sneak away

before it. Look out, here's the curtain!'

Niven saw the intimate group dissolve with a peculiar sense of relief.

'What do you think I ought to do about it?' asked Hetty.

'We'll talk about it later. Don't go till I see you.'

He went off to prepare the next act, his managerial complacence ridiculously upset for so trifling an occasion. Hetty had only one more appearance to make, as an excited member of the populace, but Ethel was yet to suffer imprisonment and ascend thereafter to heaven, guarded by angels. Between these acts Hetty had no opportunity of speaking to her sister, for the dressing-room was crowded by excited girls and Ethel carefully avoided her. But her confidence with Niven had strangely soothed Hetty's spleen and as strangely diminished Ethel's exposure of importance. With a cloak over her stage costume she waited in the wings for the performance to finish.

On the stage, Cummings, as Faust, in the throes of final dissolution, went through his postures of horror and remorse with the fire of an amateur actor in the full conviction of an artistic triumph, an emotion than which heaven knows no greater felicity.

In the red glare of hell's flames through the trap-door Arnold passed behind the stage, dressed in his ordinary clothes. To Hetty's expression of disdain he made no response, but went out by the stage door, neither assertive nor abashed. And Hetty was left with a peculiar sense of his personality, astonished at the discovery that people become vital only when they exhibit a power to disturb our tranquillity.

The final tableau went out in flames, the curtain rose once to show Faust at the feet of Mephistopheles, and

the performance ended to a conventional strain of music and the clatter of a dispersing audience. Through an acrid vapour of magnesium powder Niven appeared, dabbing at his face, hot from the infernal regions.

'I'll leave this paint on till I get home,' he said to Hetty. 'There's a fearful crowd in the dressing-room. Where's Ethel?'

'Below, I suppose,' said Hetty.

They passed down the stairs. Niven got his overcoat and Hetty glanced into the ladies' dressing-room.

'Gone home,' she said to Niven.

'All right. We needn't wait.'

They stood in the courtyard behind the hall until the audience thinned away. When they emerged into the street Hetty slipped her fine bare arm under his, holding it with an affectionate warmth. Her bosom caressed his elbow. Under the starlight her eyes were full of promises. By a perceptible pressure on his arm she kept the pace at a slow stroll. They walked in silence which her emotion found mysteriously communal; presently they would reach the triangle, with its deeply shadowing trees.

But the triangle was reached and passed before Niven turned suddenly to her.

'I wouldn't say anything of this to your mother if I were you,' he said.

'Of what? Oh, *that!*'

'It's not so very terrible, after all; a kiss or two. Most girls lose their heads in a stage setting. To make a fuss will only drive them together.'

'I suppose so.'

'Just have a discreet word with Ethel and leave it at that.'

'If you think so——'

'I do. It is never safe to enlarge on an emotional content——'

He continued to discuss the policies of repression until they reached the front gate, while Hetty strove restlessly for some signal to arrest this squandering of a glorious opportunity. But the gate was reached before she could turn to Niven and automatically command his attention.

'You'll come in and have some supper,' she said.

'No, thanks—not in this rig-out. Good night.'

He was going. Hetty put out her hand mutely and when he took it conventionally she did not withdraw her fingers but let their weight rest on his. The contact was effective for it swerved Niven's preoccupation to become suddenly aware that Hetty looked extremely beautiful in the starlight. Her eyes, darkened with paint, were pools of tenderness, the white column of her neck was inexpressibly inviting; he understood without hesitation that it was his to kiss and that she waited a response to the emotion which made no secret with his fingers.

But the need for action was too imperative for his assurance. Hetty felt the nerveless slackening of his hand and abruptly withdrew her own. There was a foolish moment between them, for now Niven badly wanted to kiss her and knew he could not. 'Good night,' he said, awkwardly, and went, cursing himself for an incompetent lover.

For some time Hetty stood at the gate, hurt and outraged, and loathing this return to a home of unfulfilled desire. She wished to weep, but instead struck the gate open angrily and forced herself to enter the house.

II

In the dining-room Mrs. Piper sat over the supper tray. She had been to the performance with Henry and his wife and waited up to discuss this important event.

'I'm surprised that Dr. Niven didn't come in,' she said. 'He so enjoys supper. And Ethel has gone to bed without any. I thought she did her part extremely well. In the dying scene she was really splendid, though I could have wished some other person had been chosen than that young Arnold. He *acts* well,' said Mrs. Piper, with strict impartiality, 'but I hardly like seeing Ethel on such terms of familiarity with him, even if it *is* only acting.'

With such an invitation, it was hard repressing a desire to explode the truth behind those stage intimacies. In Hetty's present mood it was necessary to find that the insulted God of families clamoured for a victim. Ethel was in her bedroom, half undressed, removing grease-paint from her face with vaseline. Hetty closed the door and regarded her sister with a dictatorial air.

'And how long has this affair been going on, may I ask?' she said at length.

With a stubborn expression, Ethel merely went on rubbing her cheeks.

'*You*, of all people,' went on Hetty. '*You*, with your smug and virtuous airs! *You*, letting that fellow haul you about like a barmaid! A married man, too. I suppose you've considered that side of the question? Married, with two children!'

Ethel's armour was pierced by this thrust.

'Look here,' she exclaimed, 'I've told you the truth. He was *not* kissing me. He was simply doing me up. You can believe me or not, I don't care, but you're not

going to spend the night here talking about it. Get out of my room!'

'A married man,' taunted Hetty. 'A charming conquest! What with Robert strolling out with publicans' daughters, and you having affairs with bicycle-shop keepers, the family is coming to a pretty pass.'

'Oh, go to the devil!'

'However,' resumed Hetty, 'whatever intentions you may have, my lady, I can tell you one thing, this sort of nonsense is going to stop. I haven't told mother yet, but if I see the slightest evidence of that fellow hanging round you again I shall tell her at once, mark *that*.'

Ethel scrambled through her toilet with a set face, taking no notice of Hetty. She had the wisdom to use silence as the only weapon of defence left her.

'I see *now*', went on Hetty, 'the reason for your long walks and your sneaking disappearances. To think of the deliberate way you've gone on. *You* coolly picking up with that sort of fellow. *You*——'

'I've had quite enough of you for to-night, thanks,' said Ethel viciously, turning out the light.

'Well, we shall see,' remarked Hetty, moving towards the door. 'Goodness knows how far the scandal of your conduct has gone already, but you may be sure of one thing. It won't go any further while *I* can keep an eye on you, my child.'

She shut the door sharply behind her, appeased at least to afflict a repression on a repressed world. In the dark Ethel sat up in bed, biting one of her long plaits and giving acrimony its due by utterly repudiating correction on such terms.

There were two other people who found it difficult to sleep that night, for reasons unconnected with nerves excited by this drama. Niven was one, wandering in

his pyjamas about his bachelor apartments at the hospital, and Arnold the other, lying in bed beside his wife. For the first time, that even breathing close to his cheek intruded on his bed-time thoughts of Ethel.

CHAPTER XI

I

EMBARRASSMENT for a bungled love-gesture kept Niven away from the Piper household for a period, and thereby impressed the recoil of a belittling emotion on Hetty, who let its retort fall on Ethel without compunction. She practised despotism there with the frankest good conscience.

'Injured innocence won't work with me, my child,' she said to Ethel. 'You've fooled me once, but you won't get the chance again, I can tell you! No more of your innocent disappearances. You'll stay at home, unless you go out with me. How you got to know the fellow I don't know, but it goes no further. You may make a fool of yourself, but you're not going to make a scandal of us, so console yourself with that reflection.'

Ethel did her best with an air of haughty reserve, but she was alarmed by Hetty's capable enmity. Behind it were all the authorised suppressions she had grown up with and therefore had learned how to evade. That had not been difficult. The protective quality of a shy reserve had made it easy to dodge suspicion. Not that she was aware of consciously practising a policy on that score. Her world ordained that love should be a secret ritual, and she accepted the ordination without questioning it. Besides, secrecy was its own charm; she would have been ill at ease in a world that acclaimed desire.

As for a love affair, one grew into it by letting it happen. Ethel had discovered that profundity of the will when she was a school-girl, as all truths are discovered, by their gesture in action. It never occurred

to her that people might be so constituted as to fear love and scuttle behind all sorts of reservations at its approach. Hetty's discovery of her affair with Arnold was really a most absurd exposure of Hetty. It bewildered Ethel to have so simple a business denounced as an outrage on the ritual of secrecy which she was so decorously anxious to preserve. She had never bothered to question what Hetty did with her reserves of desire. All curiosities on that count were concerned to exploit her own. Yet here was Hetty not only proclaiming herself the dupe of her own announced ritual, but actually flourishing it as a law whose Nemesis was to be discovered practising it. This was very dumbfounding, because Ethel could neither conceive a world without love nor a world that announced love. Secrecy was its special essence in desire.

'If the ass would only shut up there wouldn't be anything to bother about,' was as far as she got in that analysis.

Her affair with Arnold had been achieved as simply as an avid glance of eyes caught from a desirable youth in passing. Ethel knew when to leave on his the fleeting glance that gave him the right to capture it. There was no hesitation in Arnold's world once that masonic greeting of sex was given. He had come round the bakery corner one afternoon on his bicycle and hopped off just in time to avoid running into her. The adroit way he had balanced her aside with his arm allowed them at once to arrive at a freedom in exchanges. Ethel knew very well he had premeditated the encounter, and twenty minutes' chat at the bakery corner perfected its understanding. Not that Ethel made any admissions of that sort, whatever her fluttering eyelids might have to say about it. She let the affair continue to happen, and

it happened very nicely. The next afternoon's walk she took over the Hospital hill found Arnold strolling out of the bushes, flagrantly awaiting her.

'I didn't follow you,' he said to Ethel's astonished glance. 'I saw you making for this track and cut round ahead of you.'

That simplified matters. They were confirmed lovers before they parted. With that it only remained to arrange essential secrecies and for Ethel to let those arrangements fulfil themselves, which meant reserving her own right to choose the moment for what male innocence calls a woman's surrender. It was certainly the signal for Arnold's submission. He was a lover to whom the possession of a woman's body rendered the earth concrete and indestructible. Where doubts began with less assured lovers, his ended. Thus all his love affairs were constructed to last for ever, and perhaps for that reason he was never astonished when one ended, because there was always a fresh one waiting to confirm his faith. Ethel was its perfected assurance, the most adorable girl he had ever possessed.

And Ethel was just as charmed to have her charm affirmed by a lover who had no doubts about his power to affirm it. He was handsome, too, and practised in his *métier*. She did not trouble to forecast eventualities, being just as assured as Arnold that love, if not a love-affair, endured for ever. All she demanded was that one loved strictly within the prescribed ritual of secrecy. Arnold had his own reasons for taking the precautions he seldom bothered to take, but his affair with Ethel was too delicious to take risks over, and he was really very careful to avoid discovery. He met her only in the safest place, and that was her own home. Below the Piper fruit garden was a tangled growth of honey-

suckle, shaded by pines, where there were arbours of vanishment and covered exits, over one fence into the church paddock, or another that gave on to the flat. And Ethel could reach the front garden by screened paths as she willed, and, besides, they met for the most part when the household was asleep.

All this had been simplified by Ethel's trick of fluttering outside the range of publicity in the home. She secured privacy when she needed it by making no singularity of being private.

And now the essential to a rational existence was exploded for the first time. Hetty's rancour was too innocent to question its right to tyranny. It was sufficient that the creed of her generation was violated by this minx of a younger sister, and that excused an exasperating self-consciousness pressed on her own relations with Niven. She watched Ethel with ostentatious ruthlessness, assured that she had put a stop to meetings with Arnold, but she suspected an exchange of letters between them and kept up a shameless search of Ethel's belongings. Thus was Mrs. Piper invited to discover that vindictiveness was being practised between the sisters. Ethel came into her room one afternoon to discover Hetty ransacking an ottoman in which she stored her ribbons, lace, letters, dance programmes and other magpie privacies, and there was an instant uproar. She snatched Hetty away and slammed down the lid, white with fury. Thereupon came Mrs. Piper, amazed at unladylike expressions.

'I don't care. I won't have her prying into my things,' raged Ethel.

'Your sister', said Mrs. Piper, 'was doing no harm, merely glancing through your box.'

'Oh, of course,' sneered Ethel, 'the favourite can do

no wrong.'

'That is unjust,' said Mrs. Piper, submerging a pang of compunction for its justness. 'I favour neither of you. Really, Ethel, your temper is becoming as bad as Robert's. Since those tableaux you have done nothing but sulk from morning till night.'

'Acting has upset the poor child's nerves,' said Hetty, with a superior smile.

Ethel shut her lips and ceased to acknowledge Hetty's existence. Hetty strolled out humming.

'Really, Ethel,' said Mrs. Piper, puzzled by unaccountable reservations in the air, 'I think you are behaving very childishly. The least you can do is to turn to and help your sister with the housework till I get another housemaid. It's most annoying, Maggie going off like this so suddenly, and you know you don't even sweep your own room.'

Ethel refused to hear that either. She sat stubbornly on the ottoman till Mrs. Piper had departed. Rituals of secrecy, forsooth, in a house that demanded them and would not permit them.

II

Maggie, the housemaid, had been called away to nurse an aged mother. She had established a character for humility, discretion, noiselessness and religion which Mrs. Piper greatly regretted losing. Housemaids are an unadmitted problem to mothers with growing sons, and Mrs. Piper was never easy in selecting an applicant for the job. It seemed to her wise, as well as a tonic for nervous disorders, that Ethel should assist the present deficiency, but Ethel had grown up with a mirror which absolved her from fooleries on that score. Her aloofness from household politics was maintained as usual, save

for a darkling reservation in Hetty's presence.

On top of these annoyances Grandpa Piper chose to create a diversion by suddenly bolting. He did this effectively by making no preparations whatever. No sixpences for Peter, no dried figs for anybody, no bag for the station. He elected to take his departure without the customary store of shirts and collars which attend journeys of self-respecting travellers.

So well organised was the ancient's disappearance that the family were innocently at tea before his absence was noticed. Peter was even despatched to the back kitchen, where it was supposed he lingered as usual among the wash-tubs. But presently the nature of this irregularity was established beyond doubt. Henry arrived while they were yet at table to announce that the ancient had been observed taking a ticket by the mid-day train for Melbourne.

'But I'll spoil his game!' blustered Henry. 'Down I go first thing to-morrow and back he comes if I have to scruff him home by the neck. And just when I'd got that deed of partnership fixed up for him to sign,' added Henry, maddened at such ingratitude in a grandfather.

'Did he know about it?' asked Hetty.

'How do I know? He's been mooning about the office for the last three days, shuffling among my papers. He may have seen a rough draft of it. Why in thunder you people couldn't keep a proper watch over him I don't know.'

'And have I no told ye he'd run off on ye yet?' exclaimed Uncle Jobson. 'If ye'd taken my advice and had his boots away it w'd never have happened.'

'I really cannot think what possessed your grandpapa,' said Mrs. Piper.

'I can,' retorted Henry. 'The old snufflebuster's

gone on the spree, of course. He's probably taking a gay lady to the Café Dinat by this time.'

'Henry!' said Mrs. Piper severely, indicating Peter, who listened with avidity to this scandal among his elders.

'I'd dinner him and winner him,' exclaimed Uncle Jobson, stirred to unholy exasperation by the idea of Grandpa Piper leading the gay life. 'I'd gie him dodderin' after the wimmen, when he ought to be trem'lin' in fear of Almighty Goad, the randy old billy-goat.'

'Peter!' said Mrs. Piper hurriedly, 'run away and play while your uncle is speaking.'

'I've wired Uncle Thomas to keep a look-out for him,' said Henry, 'and I'll go down first train to-morrow, and when I get him——'

With some grinding of the teeth Henry departed, imposing the role of sleuth-hound on the character of a baffled draper.

It may be said here that Henry did not drag a captive Grandfather back next day, nor the next day either. He was gone a week, and returned rather in the rôle of a draper who supports the character of a baffled sleuth-hound. The ancient appeared to have covered his departure with a masterly lack of ostentation. He had cashed a large cheque and vanished, and a faint tremor shook the foundations of Piper and Co.

But to Hetty this disturbance touched only the higher matter of family prestige.

'I wish to Heaven someone else could go instead of that blitherer of a Henry,' she exclaimed. 'He's capable of making a perfect exhibition of us by dragging that wretched old man back in front of everybody.'

She fled to the drawing-room—her refuge in mo-

ments of lacerated self-respect. The respectability of its bric-à-brac defied even the antics of Grandpa Piper. Robert came out on to the verandah grinning, charmed to feel the pillars of respectability tremble.

'What a joke,' he said, encountering Ethel in the cane lounge.

'Grandpa?'

'Yes, you know the old pot really does go on the spree and cart women about.'

'Not really?'

'He does. The Uncle Thomas push saw him at the theatre with a fearful-looking tart—all furs and peroxide hair. Old Grandpa Whiskers saw them too, but he never turned a hair. Pretended they weren't there. I think it's lovely.'

'Exactly!' said Hetty, appearing at the French windows. 'It's what I'd expect you to think, in view of your predilection for publicans' daughters. Heavens!' she added viciously. 'What a genius our family has for making itself cheap in public!'

She disappeared, and they could hear her snap open the piano, and the viperish swish of her skirts against the stool. Robert passed these actions under a cynical review for Ethel's benefit.

'Must be finding it hard work getting Niven up to the scratch,' he said. 'He looks to me like one of the cold-fish brigade. How do you find him?'

'I think he's about up to Hetty's standard,' said Ethel vindictively.

Robert went off to take up a position behind the Grammar School fence, which overlooked the parsonage. If a towel depended from the sash of Millie's bedroom window it meant that he was to wait; if there was no towel the Rev. Kneebone was announced too

vigilant to be eluded for that night.

But eluded he very frequently was. Now that rebellion was established at the price of futile threats and shakings Millie paid it and went off again the moment her father's back was turned. Pursuit might follow, but they were ingenious in devising an ambush. They used the Grammar School when leisure was proscribed and an empty cottage behind the parsonage, achieved by breaking in at a window. Sometimes, on dark nights, they ascended to the Piper hayloft. It was thrilling and delicious, Robert found, to haul Millie, hatless and breathless, into some such security, and hug her there between whispers.

But to-night there was no towel at the window, and, besides, the closeness threatened rain. Whistling, he passed on to Mr. Bandparts.

III

The night continued hot and oppressive under low-lying thunder clouds, and a stifled emotion kept Ethel squirming on the cane lounge while Hetty thumped the piano. The noise aggravated Ethel, with its effect of Hetty's domineering personality. She was at the mercy of that autocrat on the piano stool, and she felt vindictive and helpless. Upon that mood Niven arrived. He was dressed in white, and appeared so unannounced in his rubber-soled shoes that Ethel had no time to escape.

'Don't move,' he said, taking her hand. 'Hot, isn't it? I'll sit here.'

He dropped on the verandah edge, fanning himself with his hat. Ethel remained on the cane chair, ill at ease. Hetty played on, unaware of the visitor. The light from the French windows showed him in his spotless drill suit, his pipe-clayed shoes, his thin face, so clean,

so shaven that something of masculinity was lost in his too immaculate appearance.

'We shall have a storm presently,' he said. 'Be a relief—too deuced hot for comfort.'

This air of casual greeting did not deceive Ethel. Behind it she divined other preoccupations. She had glimpsed Hetty whispering to him on the night of the tableaux and it was a simple inference to guess what about.

'Hetty's inside,' she said at length.

'Yes, I hear her,' said Niven. 'Rather hot indoors,' he added, and remained where he was. Ethel pulled at a loose strand of cane and wished he would go. But instead he took out a cigarette-case and with an absent air selected a cigarette. In the slowest possible way he found a match, lit his cigarette, and remained abstractedly fiddling with the matchbox. Behind these precautions he glanced covertly at Ethel, absorbing her presence from a new and disturbing angle. She was an initiate of the kiss, at least, this charming young girl. The softened light favoured some attention to this bizarre reflection. It lent a nimbus to Ethel's fair hair, like the aureole of a saint. In the pale oval of her face her eyes were liquid and sombre, and turned aside from his with a petulant air.

'Looks adorable,' thought Niven, and found himself at a loss for conversation.

'What a lot of time you spend out here!' he said at length.

'Do I?' said Ethel.

'I don't know. I seem to find you here whenever I call.'

'It's habit, I suppose.'

Sympathy refused to move in these exchanges. Niven

smoked and Ethel wriggled, scratching her ankle where a mosquito had stung her. Oppressive heat filled an interval of silence.

'Do you find your thoughts such good company?' asked Niven languidly.

'Not particularly,' said Ethel suspiciously. 'Do you?'

'No, I suppose not, unless one happens to have some charming memory to linger over—I mean——' he explained hurriedly, 'thoughts are negative things; one is hardly ever happy or unhappy merely thinking. It's different when one is fresh from some emotion—sense and thought are so opposed. I mean, the stronger one feels the less clearly one thinks. I'm becoming incoherent,' he added abruptly.

Ethel remained on her defence; these disjointed generalities appeared to hint reflections on a secret love-affair. Niven was embarrassed by their inaptness too. In his anxiety to disclaim that impression he became suddenly energetic.

'There's a conversational breaking strain with everybody,' he said. 'You know what I mean—you reach it and conversation is easy. I'm hanged if I know why, but I never can reach the point with you, Ethel!'

Ethel stared at this disclosure. Its tone was so unusual. But her lack of interest in him seemed to reject its appeal to intimacy. To her relief the piano ceased suddenly and Hetty appeared at the French windows.

'Hallo,' she said. 'I didn't know you were here. I've found the score of "Pinafore" you wanted.'

Her tone was frankly unaware of any self-consciousness between them, and Niven was relieved to return its intonation.

'Really!' he said, collapsing into lassitude. 'It's too frightfully hot for singing.'

'These languid airs are merely for effect,' said Hetty. 'Come inside and I'll get you a cool drink to revive you.'

Niven made no effort to move for some moments, but Hetty waited so obviously at the door for him that he threw away his cigarette and followed her into the drawing-room. Without joining her at the piano he remained fiddling with the ornaments on a loaded table, with the irritable air of a customer who cannot make up his mind which article to buy.

Ethel studied him from her chair with a novel sense of interest. Her hostility was vaguely pacified, as though for the first time some hint of his humanity dawned upon her. From this regard she was attracted by hearing her name called softly from behind the lilac bushes in the garden. Upon her astonished vision therefrom emerged Arnold, who stepped across to the verandah and grinned invitingly in her face.

'You!' breathed Ethel, and got off the cane lounge with stifled sounds of amazement. She darted a frightened look at the drawing-room windows and dragged him away from the light.

'What madness!' she exclaimed. 'You'll be seen.'

'It's all right,' said Arnold, pacifying her with kisses.

'It isn't, it's pure insanity,' exclaimed Ethel. 'The idea of coming here—you'll be caught. If Hetty came out—good Heavens!'

Without paying any attention to these protests Arnold led her along the path till the fernhouse hid them from the windows.

'This'll do,' he said, and took her in his arms. But Ethel was disturbed at the possibility of discovery, and kept insisting that he should go.

'I'm hanged if I will,' said Arnold. 'I haven't seen you for over a week.'

'But what madness to come *here!*'

'I've been here half a dozen times; this is the first chance I've had of getting hold of you.'

'You've been here?'

'Why not? I hung about down below till I couldn't stand it any longer. Why didn't you come?'

'I didn't dare. Hetty watches me like a cat.'

In hasty whispers she poured out the time-honoured grievance of the younger sister, to which Arnold listened with anger.

'This won't do at all,' he said. 'Think it'll blow over if we lie low?'

'Not with Hetty. She's got the energy of a demon. I don't know what to do.'

'I'd like to twist her neck!' said Arnold resentfully. He smoothed his cheek against Ethel's, absorbing its charm in the threat of separation from her. The thunder rumbled overhead and a few drops of rain spattered them.

'Look here,' he said at length, 'Hetty or no Hetty I must see you. I won't give up seeing you. We must find some way of meeting.'

'But what can I do?' protested Ethel. 'I'm perfectly helpless. If she catches me again she'll tell mother and I'd have the whole house about my ears. I couldn't stand it. It's bad enough now, but if they all know——'

'You leave it to me,' said Arnold with assurance. 'If you can't get out to see me I'll come here to see you.'

'Don't think of it,' exclaimed Ethel, freshly alarmed, but he commenced to kiss her under the chin, and her voice trailed away in a relaxed murmur.

The senses in this affair were still in a honeymoon stage of freshness, and a glare of lightning caught them in a charmed surrender to emotion and startled Ethel

into fresh agitation.

'What idiots we are!' she exclaimed. 'They could have seen us. I must go.'

'Just our luck. Here's God throwing the limelight on us now. No—wait half a minute. Keep awake to-morrow night. I'll come for you.'

'Don't—don't!'

'Yes, I will. You needn't worry—there's no danger. I hate leaving you,' he added, cramming his irritation into a final embrace. A flash of lightning caused them to separate sharply, and a smart downpour of rain caught Ethel as she darted for the verandah.

She reached the cane chair breathless, relieved to hear Hetty at the piano. Her thoughts moved rapidly, but she could not catch at resolutions in them. Somewhere behind them lurked an evasive truth that seemed to disparage the alarms and precautions of home. 'It's charming to be loved—life is a shell without it,' it said. Yet behind that was another truth, not concerned to protect love—some urgent necessity of self. It evaded her, and she gave herself to easier thoughts, listening vaguely to the exchanges in the drawing-room, and pausing consciously to catch the intonation of Niven's voice.

'If you want supper, child, you'd better come and get it,' said Hetty from the window.

Ethel entered the drawing-room and stood for a moment shading her eyes from the light. Her cheeks were flushed; her black eyelashes veiled a nervous glance from Hetty to Niven; she might have been a stranger in the house by her fluttered air of embarrassment.

Niven pushed a chair forward and held a cushion for her head with a lively appearance of welcome. And as

Ethel slipped down with her favourite wriggle his hand brushed her hair in a secret caress.

'Why, you're quite wet,' he said.

'Am I?' said Ethel. 'I suppose some drops splashed on me from the verandah.'

'Little innocent,' said Hetty sweetly, 'so lost in maiden meditation that she didn't notice it was raining.'

But she shot a sharp glance over the pair of them with a suspicion that for the moment had nothing at all to do with the family prestige.

CHAPTER XII

I

THERE was a tennis-club match that afternoon, to which Hetty went as usual. Instead of going to tennis Niven called on Hetty. That, at least, was Mrs. Piper's supposition, caught in a fluster of cake-making, and a peremptory order was sent for Ethel to entertain the visitor.

Ethel entered the room with no divergence from her usual manner. She met Niven's eyes with her fleeting glance, dropped her eyelashes, and got among the sofa cushions with a self-effacing wriggle. Yet she knew Niven's call was premeditated with the intention of seeing her relieved of Hetty's presence. His last few visits had made it clear that suspense attended his interrupted talk with her on the verandah, and Ethel had counted up the little signals of speculation in her direction with satisfied malice against Hetty.

Now that he was alone with her his composure was affected, and he fidgeted among the bric-à-brac, which exercised a baleful attraction to his fingers.

'I say, come on to the verandah,' he said suddenly, interrupting some fragmentary small talk. 'I don't know why, but I always think of this room as Hetty's property and the verandah as yours.'

He flushed at this admission, opening the French windows for her to pass out. Ethel obeyed his fancy with a docile air. But she took the cane lounge, and let him find a seat for himself on the verandah. If Hetty had been there she would have forced the cane lounge on Niven, but Ethel obeyed a cooler instinct in these

matters. Her little, embarrassed airs were self-protective, and she had the self-contained art of silence when she chose, and forced a disconcerting initiative on Niven. Already the air of preparation in this meeting had a very deadening effect on his spirits. It forced him to exaggerate his habit of composure in self-defence, and the pair of them sat for some time in an awkward silence; Ethel without movement, and Niven twisting the signet ring on his finger with a bored expression which was the outward effect of desperation.

'It's no good, Ethel,' he said abruptly. 'I have to admit that I'm an absolute fool with women.'

He glanced at Ethel's eyes, and received the encouragement of an astonished expression.

'Look at the effect you have on me,' he went on. 'You have the devilish ability to make me feel a complete ass.'

'*I* do?' exclaimed Ethel.

'Yes, *you* do. I drivel whenever I talk to you. It's the fatal effect of making a particular effort to interest.'

Ethel allowed this compliment to dissolve in her mind, like a piece of sugar in the mouth.

'I suppose it's my fault,' she said, with an ingenuous air.

'That won't do. The effect I have on you is one of mere indifference, whereas the effect you have on me is to send me away curled up with humiliation.'

Ethel laughed suddenly, with a surprising effect of lightening Niven's spirits.

'I really can't see you in that attitude,' she said.

'It's my normal attitude. Humility is my vice. I'm always in a state of apprehension over the effect I have on people.'

'*You* are?'

'Yes. I'm one of those socially inept people who can't shake hands without a violent mental effort.'

'That's about the last character I would give you,' said Ethel with conviction.

'Well, what character would you give me?'

Ethel smiled in a secret manner at her finger nails.

'I can see you haven't the courage to answer that question,' said Niven.

'Why?'

'Because you really think me a self-satisfied prig.'

Ethel disclaimed this definition with guilty haste.

'I don't. I don't think about your character at all.'

'That's worse still. I'd sooner be unpleasantly thought of than not thought of at all.'

'But I don't believe in settling beforehand what people are like. They always turn out different.'

'Then perhaps your definition of me may turn out to be wrong after all.'

'It's not my definition of you. It's your definition of yourself.'

Niven experienced a thrill of satisfaction. It seemed to him that at last he had succeeded in dissipating her shy reserve.

'If you asked me to define *your* character', he went on, 'I should be helpless. It's not for want of trying, I assure you. I've known you for months now and I'm still as far off as ever from a definition. You're like one of the lucky bags the children stare at through shop windows and wonder what's in them.'

'They're usually made of a ha'porth of boiled lollies and a brass ring, when they aren't stuffed with paper,' said Ethel.

'Anyway, they're very charming to speculate on',

said Niven. 'I must have spent days outside your shop window.'

Ethel made no effort to disavow these insinuations. Instead, she allowed her chin to sink with a caressing movement against her shoulder in order to shoot a glance at him from under her long lashes. It was a calculated effort, and its effect was one of shy tenderness.

Niven admitted the success of this attack by losing his assurance on the spot. He tried to think of something effective to say when the only effective thing to do was to kiss her.

'It's curious,' he said lamely. 'I've seen a lot of you, and yet we've—well, we've never really had what you might call a conversation together yet.'

He fingered his glasses with a return to self-consciousness, while Ethel studied his profile with an enigmatical speculation. Footsteps and the jingle of a tea-tray in the drawing-room came as an interruption to this moment of indecision.

'There's your tay set for you an' drawin' nicely this minute, Miss Ethel,' called old Bridget from the hall.

Niven followed Ethel into the drawing-room with a depressing conviction of incompetence, which Ethel made no effort to relieve by speech. She poured out the tea sedately, as though glances of subtle invitation to a lover were things beyond her consciousness.

'That's yours,' she said. 'I don't take sugar in mine. Will you have a cake or a sandwich?'

Niven took a cake, mentally damning the necessity of eating it. He leaned against the mantelpiece, all at sea for a means of returning to intimacy. He thought he had made a mess of this interview. He thought he lacked the courage to proceed with it. His thought reviewed it from the masculine fallacy that initiative in

love is the business of the male.

Ethel stowed herself comfortably on the sofa, allowing him to hold a cushion for her back. As he bent over her the faint, sweet aroma of her skin disturbed him vitally, with its invitation to put this silly rubbish of hesitation from his mind.

'Thanks,' said Ethel. 'I've got all the cushions I want. You can have this one for yourself.'

Niven put away his cup hastily, in order to obey this artless permission to seat himself beside her.

It may be said in evidence of a temperamental lack of enterprise in Niven that he did not get so far as embracing Ethel on the sofa. He found exhilaration in sitting close to the texture of her skin, in studying minutely the pencilling of her eyebrows, the clarity of her blue eyes, the movements of her lips, the roundness of her throat. But action in him lagged behind a desire to exploit these charms. They had the front of the house to themselves, and no one appeared to interrupt the intimacy of words. No one, at least, till Hetty arrived in her rubber-soled tennis shoes and paused outside the door to catch the subdued and intimate note of conversation in the front room.

'Ah, but you don't know,' she heard Ethel say, with her hesitating laugh. 'I mightn't be that at all. I might be something quite different.'

'I think so, anyway. You see, I've the advantage of having thought a lot about you, while you haven't thought about me at all.'

'How do you know I haven't?'

'Don't make me indecently vain. You know very well this is the first real talk I've ever had with you.'

'Perhaps it's the first time you wanted to.'

'Perhaps it's the first chance I've had.'

A pang of apprehension caused Hetty to thrust the door open, surprising by that act a picture, intimate and tender. Niven's elbow rested on the couch so that it touched Ethel's shoulder. He stared into her face with absorbed attention while their bodies exhibited that inclination which obeys the magnetism of the blood that draws two people interested in each other together.

Hetty's entrance disrupted this confessional pose into guilty confusion. Niven stretched himself with an air of languor too sudden to be effective; Ethel convicted herself by a hasty assumption of reserve.

'I suppose the tea's cold,' said Hetty, deliberately turning her back on the futile exhibition.

'I'll get you a cup,' said Ethel, glad of a chance to escape from the room. Hetty stood by the tea-table, tracing the pattern of the tray cloth with her finger. Ill at ease, Niven got up and strolled to the window.

'Any sort of a crowd at tennis?' he asked.

'The usual,' said Hetty, without looking up.

'Don't you think you might have been wrong about that business?' he said suddenly, and cursed himself for the inept confession, which Hetty acknowledged with a twisted smile.

'I'm sorry to disturb your anxiety to see no harm in the affair,' she said. 'I have a very good reason to believe I wasn't in the least mistaken.'

'What reason?' asked Niven, fiddling with the table ornaments.

'A very obvious one. Arnold comes here at night while we are asleep, and Ethel meets him.'

Niven was trying to balance a small glass vase on top of a china figure. It slipped and smashed on the table.

'I'm sorry,' he said hurriedly. 'How infernally awkward of me.' But he went on abstractedly fitting the

broken pieces together.

'D'you think I ought to speak to that fellow?' he said at length.

Hetty gave a short laugh.

'Please yourself,' she said. 'You seem to be taking his rivalry rather to heart.'

'Eh?' said Niven, staring.

Hetty suffered a momentary catch in the breath.

'Nothing,' she said. 'It wouldn't make any difference either way—people always do what they want to do—you can't stop them—it's absurd to——'

An unusual effort at control saved her on the point of exposure. She tucked her emotion away suddenly under an appearance of coolness and turned to the door.

'I think I'll go and have a bath, if you'll excuse me,' she said.

'You—you mustn't think I'm personally interested,' said Niven apologetically. 'I merely—I felt that—naturally one doesn't like to see a charming girl like Ethel——'

'Don't try to explain,' said Hetty. 'It makes us both look fools.'

She walked composedly to the door, but her control failed at a glance in parting. Niven had only a momentary impression of big black eyes in a pale face, but he was left abashed and troubled, as though he had looked suddenly into a picture of torment.

He stood for quite a long time, unable to reassure his mind of this impression.

'Hang it,' he said to the bric-à-brac. 'It's her mistake—I never gave her any reason to——'

He found his hat, and put it on with an effort at a shrug. But he departed with a troubled air, and was furious with himself all the way back to the hospital.

Something of the same emotion kept Ethel out of Hetty's way till they met under cover of the tea-table. She was more uneasy to discover Hetty pale and subdued, but otherwise without expression. If there was an intention in this demeanour it was concerned to avoid utterly any knowledge of Ethel's presence. And this was not reassuring, from one so vitriolic as Hetty.

'Blast Niven, I don't want him,' thought Ethel, and so did away with the annoyance of predatory premeditations.

II

It was the dark hour before the dawn, when time moves at its slowest, when energy is relaxed, and human vitality is at its ebb.

A cock crowed at the smell of dawn, and a succession of crows echoed him across the silent township.

Ethel came slowly up from the fruit garden, dragging her kimono across the dew-wet strawberry beds. With drowsy inattention she pulled the yard gate to and stole across to the front garden behind the fernery fence. Here she paused, yawning and listening, but only the finer perceptions of silence and darkness greeted her—the scent of wallflowers, wet earth, and clean cool air.

The French windows of the drawing-room received her into the warm and vitiated atmosphere of a house full of sleeping people. In her own room, which she gained with practised noiselessness, she lit a candle and turned for a towel to dry her damp hair, and not till then discovered Hetty seated implacably on her bed.

Ethel emitted a breathless squeak at this apparition of vengeance. For some moments she could only gasp and stare and compute its threat of calamity.

'What a—shock you gave me,' she gulped.

'I'm aware I wasn't expected,' said Hetty cynically. She stared at Ethel with an unblinking animosity. Like Ethel, she wore a silk kimono over her petticoat; the fine arch of her chest and the poise of her bare neck made her look big and arrogant, and not to be denied.

'Before you start the usual lies', she said, 'I may as well tell you I've been down the back garden too, and seen your meeting with the fascinating Arnold.'

Ethel closed her lips, and the stir of emotion passed from her face. She scrutinised Hetty's stare of hate a moment and turned aside, waiting. In the silence the breathing of the household seemed faintly audible.

'I shall tell mother, now, of course,' said Hetty.

She listened a moment, to assure herself the house was undisturbed.

'I never believed you for a minute,' she went on, 'but I knew you'd lie till the crack of doom unless I found you out openly. What an absolute fool you must be, to carry on in this way. You must be insane over the fellow.'

Ethel refused to respond. She had the air of waiting for an annoying but inevitable interlude to be disposed of.

'I can't understand you,' continued Hetty. 'You're not a child. You know perfectly well what sort of risks you run, apart from the scandal. If it were only dragging your own name in the mud it wouldn't matter, but *we* should have to stand the racket too. I'm past caring particularly what sort of fool you make of yourself, but I'm certainly not going to let you make mother wretched. I shall tell her about it to-morrow, not from any satisfaction of getting you into a row, but because there's no other way of stopping your conduct.'

It sounded well. It sounded like the voice of recti-

tude, in spite of the glitter in Hetty's eyes.

'If there was a scandal I believe you'd wriggle out of it,' she said. 'You're built that way. You wouldn't mind letting us in for it, though. I know you now like a book, my young friend. You're as callous as a block of wood, as long as your own feelings aren't disturbed. Calculating little scalp hunter, that's what you are, for all your pussy-cat airs.'

Her unblinking stare at Ethel was charged suddenly with another emotion, which turned it haggard.

'A damned fool I am, stopping you like this,' she said. 'If I served my own interests I'd see you to the devil with that fellow. You've spoiled my chances, and I—I——'

Ethel glanced up austerely at this admission she waited for.

'If you mean Niven, you are making a mistake,' she said. 'I don't want him. I don't like him.'

'Yes, but you'll take him, for all that. He's a man, and he happens to be about the house. What more do you want? You! Oh, you, with your maidenly wriggles and your pretty little tricks of embarrassment. That sort of rubbish goes down with men apparently. You've got him by it, anyway.'

'It's not true. I've never taken the slightest interest in him.'

'Liar! Do you think I haven't seen you wait to catch his eye and then send that cat's glance of yours at him from under your eyelashes. I never thought anything so transparent could be effective till I saw him staring at you this afternoon like a moon-struck fool.'

In spite of herself Ethel's eyes exchanged a swift confidence with the mirror, a tender little glance which confirmed Hetty's assurance of its effectiveness on

Niven. Hetty saw it too and was confirmed in all assurances of lacerated self-respect.

'You smirking little beast!' she cried. 'That's all it means to you—the smug complacence of satisfied vanity. And my chances—my chances——'

She made a distracted gesture, gave it up and threw herself across the bed, snatching the pillow to smother her sobs in. She writhed and twisted, her shoulders hunched to retain the pillow pressed against the release of outcries.

Ethel stared at this exhibition, perplexed and disturbed. She disliked it extremely, with its demand for responsive torments in the onlooker. It offended in her the decencies of that restraint which is mistaken for insincerity by the self-elect of suffering. Not that the thoughts behind her little fair head reached her own ears, assured of wisdom though they were. 'Let this incompetent suffer,' they said. 'She had a man under her fingers and let him escape. Of course you took him from her, and very wisely too.'

What she said was:

'Look here, Hetty, I really don't want Niven. It's absurd saying I tried to get him. I'm not to blame if he —I've hardly spoken to him, except this afternoon, and that was nothing. What's the good of going on like this when—oh, bother it——'

Hetty's convulsion was not to be reached by words, that was clear. Her mane of black hair, shaken loose, obscured her face; a plump white leg stuck out from her kimono, quivering spasmodically; her body shook with the recoil of smothered respirations.

Ethel gave a helpless shrug and waited. Perhaps she was aware that life would be always an affair of waiting while others exploded outcries of responsibility on her

account. Hetty gave her good measure now, till emotion drained her body to passivity, save for a belated gulp or two. She sat up at last and looked about for something to dry her eyes on, but seeing nothing within reach swabbed at them with the skirt of her robe. Wisps of hair clung to her sodden cheeks. She no longer looked at Ethel, unable to sustain emotion further. Mechanically twisting up her hair she rose uncertainly and moved to the door. There Ethel arrested her, as it seemed, meekly.

'I say—Hetty——'

'What?'

'You're not going to make a fool of a row, are you, and tell mother about Jerry Arnold?'

Hetty laughed bitterly.

'Trust you to think of yourself,' she said, and remained irresolutely twisting the door handle, vacant, detached, unable to focus attention. She roused herself from that with a sigh, to discover Ethel still meekly waiting.

'Why should I bother about you?' she said in a low voice. 'Why should I bother about anything? I'm sick of it. Go to the devil your own way.'

She went out, closing the door behind her. Ethel remained listening till the shuffling movements of her departure died away. The mirror reflected an expression of calculation and relief, which she effaced with a grimace at herself in the glass. Thereafter she stood for some time, studying herself with an air of speculative interest, as if this were a polite stranger in whose affairs she felt a distant curiosity.

From that she set about brushing her hair, and making an orderly toilet for the night. Refreshed by this process, and looking virginal in her white night-

gown and long fair plaits, she took a writing pad from her ottoman and, placing the ink within reach, got into bed. With a serious air, which clearly assured the transaction of a conscientious obligation, she scribbled a note, addressed an envelope to Arnold, and thrust pad and letter away under her mattress. As she turned to put out the light the room turned from yellow to the cold grey of dawn, and in the hope of a few hours' sleep she pulled the sheet over her eyes and snuggled down on the pillow still damp with Hetty's tears.

CHAPTER XIII

I

It was a state of prowling indecision that forced Niven to call on Arnold. He went with the conviction that he was acting like a fool, but a man in such a state of mind is a fool, and a choice of action is hardly left him.

He found Arnold in the back workshop. It was after five, the two mechanics had left and Arnold was seated on the bench with his rather immobile face set in a blank frown.

'Hallo!' he said at the sight of Niven, and was checked suddenly in his greeting.

Niven received a check too. He had intended to be frank and direct in this matter, but at the sight of Arnold frankness stuck in his throat. He had an instant conviction that Hetty spoke the truth, as though the presence of his rival confirmed all suspicion. The spirit of enmity forced him to make a special effort at deliberation.

'I've called to see you on rather a difficult matter,' he said stiffly.

Arnold made an interrogative sound. He divined Niven's antagonism at a glance.

'I may as well say at the start that I've come on my own responsibility,' went on Niven, 'though I consider that what I have to say is justified by my friendship with the Piper family.'

He stuck at that for a moment, and Arnold made no effort to help him out.

'I don't want to beat about the bush,' said Niven. 'Your attentions in that direction are known, and I can

tell you they're considered extremely undesirable.'

'I'm hanged if I know what you mean.'

'Yes, you do.'

'I do not.'

'Well, if you force me to be explicit, I can only tell you that it's well known to certain members of the family that you are constantly hanging about the place at night.'

'This is news,' jeered Arnold. 'What am I supposed to be hanging round after? The fowls or the spoons?'

Niven put up his chin with the disdainful air that goes with eye-glasses.

'Don't be a fool,' he said.

Arnold found his attention magnetised by the point of Niven's chin, as something detestable. An impulse urged him to plant a sudden blow on it, but he forced himself to consider the impolicy of such an act.

'Look here,' he said. 'I hardly know either of the Miss Pipers, if that's what you're driving at. I've hardly spoken to them outside that show of yours, so I'm hanged if I know how you've got the immortal rind to come at me with a yarn like this.'

'You're expected to say something of that sort, of course,' said Niven. 'However, the point doesn't admit of discussion. What I came to say was this—it's time you realised what you're doing. You're a married man and you've no right to run after a girl of her age. You've nothing to offer in exchange for messing up her reputation and bringing a scandal home to a decent family. You'd better look at the matter on the simple terms of making a damned nuisance of yourself under conditions that may lead to exposure for Eth—for both of you.'

A flush spread under Arnold's skin, and he got off

the bench with a truculent air.

'Whether you believe me or not doesn't matter, but I'd like to know what in Hell's business it is of yours, anyway?' he said.

'I've already told you I don't pretend to a right of interference,' said Niven. 'It's a logical inevitability that someone should suggest an aspect of the affair that must be pretty apparent to your own thoughts.'

Arnold stood and stared at Niven, doing his best to digest this leek with composure. For a moment the point of Niven's chin almost triumphed, for the enmity of this visitor, and not his mission, seemed to demand a reprisal. He went on staring, reviewing it in the light of something newly significant. And as if that light suddenly diminished it in importance he whistled with an insulting air of indifference.

'Anything more to say?' he asked at the end of the performance.

Niven received the hint in good order.

'I've no wish to precipitate an unpleasant situation,' he said in going. 'For that reason I came here—as a friend of the Piper family I could hardly do less.'

'Too dam' thin,' said Arnold offensively. 'Find a better excuse.'

Niven turned at the door and stared back. He saw a muscular youth who balanced easily on his feet, who carried his head with an air of confidence, and whose black eyes expressed derision. He saw, in fact, the assurance of a successful rival. Of all men such a one has least of humanity in him. Such a one may be stabbed or throttled and trampled under foot; hardly else may his humanity be tolerated. But Niven was not equipped to vindicate Man's normal release of hate. All he did was to shrug his shoulders and walk off with-

out a word. And as he walked he cut impotently at the air with his stick, loathing himself for having postured for so futile a result. Besides, Arnold would probably tell Ethel of his interference, and he saw his own pretensions demolished in ridicule. In the light of Arnold's assurance he thought he saw Ethel clearly for the first time, and detested what he saw. That fair and delicately-shaped face was one of Nature's traps. That little head was full of cunning and salacious thoughts. This was a girl ready-made for the trade of love, who picked her lovers with the tranquillity of a courtesan. In short, he lavished execrations on those aspects of desire in Ethel which would have perfected her desirability to himself, and achieved thereby the desperate remedy of rubbing salt into his lacerated self-respect.

But the wound that needed no salt was the picture of Ethel in Arnold's arms, and he squirmed at that gratuitously.

II

Alone in the shop, Arnold pulled a letter from his pocket and scanned it suspiciously. It was a hasty scrawl, scribbled to get an unpleasant business done with.

'A most awful thing has happened,' said this letter. 'Hetty saw us to-night under the pines—I found her seated in my room, and we have had an awful row. She is going to tell mother first thing to-morrow unless I promise to give you up—Of course I had to promise—I have been sitting up all night thinking about this—and I think we must part—I mean this, Jerry—though I hate the idea of not seeing you—We must not meet again—at least—not at present. Don't come to the house again—it would be fatal. It's frightfully late and

I feel wretched. I can't bear the thought of not seeing you again, and I feel like howling, but it will never do for you to come to the house again. If you really love me, Jerry, you will do what I ask——'

'Jer-ry!' came a call from somewhere behind the shop.

'Alright!' shouted Arnold, and went on thinking with the letter before his eyes. He stuffed it back into his trouser pocket at length with a resentful air and went out the back door which led into a green lane that ran between his shop and cottage. At the yard gate his wife waited in a neat blue apron, and a tottering homunculus aged two and a half met him half way with noises of appreciation.

Arnold picked up the child and tossed him in the air with something of the perfunctory manner in which one pats a favourite dog. His wife watched them both protectively, in her correct setting of a clean back-yard which looked like the work of a Dutch housewife, with its washed brick paving, its pink hydrangeas in tubs, and its maidenhair fern in hanging baskets.

'Your hot water's in the bathroom,' she said. 'Don't be long—the tea's made.'

With his working clothes changed, Arnold sat down to his meal in the kitchen and his wife to her evening debauch of gossip, which did not affect a trained ability to eat and talk simultaneously. She let out the day's collection of repressed chatter in a continuous stream, whose sources were mysterious since she hardly ever went out and saw the town only from over the front garden fence. Perhaps she absorbed it through her pores. Mrs. Henry Piper, who lived next door, doubtless accounted for some of it. These wives did not officially know each other or visit each other's houses. They obeyed occult interdictions on these matters which

no mind might fathom, but they consorted daily with a strictly neutral backyard fence between them.

Arnold listened, as to an accredited buzzing, not otherwise disturbed. At present he had other things to think about, and did so, till his offspring arrived from the backyard flourishing a turkey's feather, at which he made sounds like a small locomotive to invite attention to an obvious marvel.

'Hallo, Jobags,' said Arnold, and lifted the child to his knee, which revealed fresh evidences of a marvellous world, where there were plates to clutch at, knives to rattle, and the salad bowl to dabble in.

Arnold allowed this investigation of wonders to make a mess of the tablecloth, then put the child down with a failure of interest in his antics. He loitered about the kitchen while his wife cleared the table, washed up the dishes, and put the children to bed. He could hear her now, in tones of solemn admonition, commanding them to sleep, as if they were refractory adults bent on frustrating a religious observance.

These were the sounds of home, a place, it now appeared, of his own begetting. It had never occurred to him to review it before as a facet of his desire for Ethel, but now he found it necessary to account for the fact that he undoubtedly had a home and a wife and two children. He was still blankly accounting for this singularity when his wife appeared with the lamp.

'What, not gone yet?' she said, astonished.

'Not yet,' he said. 'Perhaps I'll stay at home to-night with you, for a change.'

'You must be ill,' she retorted, in the idiom of light humour. 'Wait till I get my sewing.'

She got it briskly, turned up the light, and began stitching at once.

'The Fipson's new slavey left this morning,' she said brightly. 'That's the third they've had in one month, but they all say it's impossible to stand her nagging, and they've had another awful row with the Gadgets, this time because old Mrs. Gadget has repeatedly tried to skin their cat; a rabbit, she calls it, though everyone knows she was two years in the asylum, and ought to be there now; a cat dare not show its nose through the fence, and their uncle—*he* gave Mrs. Flidgers a piano, and her husband going round telling every one what a beautiful instrument it was, as if they didn't know where the Gadget's uncle is when Flidgers is on night shift, and it's really only second-hand; he bought it at Brindle's sale——'

Arnold kept pondering over her round simpleton's eyes and her two dimples, which gave an air of pleased surprise to the unravelling of her treasure trove of gossip. It astonished him that they showed no trace of discontent. Already he regretted the irresponsible impulse to spend an evening in this small uninspiring house; there was no living through the night without seeing Ethel. Behind his wife's unrecorded chatter he thought of her as he had seen her last night in the starlight, with her hair tumbled on her shoulders, and the luminous pallor of her breasts, like silver. He could feel the nibble of her lips against his ear, and found his senses memorising other contacts; she knew when to abate her reserve, which usually left caresses to him, and to become suddenly lewd and imperative. One could never exhaust the charm of a girl like that, for she would always keep alive the illusion of sensualities to be discovered. And now there were suggestions abroad that he should lose her.

Again, automatically, attention was referred to his

wife, complacently talking away under the lamplight.

He had married her because a pleasing little love episode had suddenly found itself involved with the nuisance of childbirth. Not that it occurred to him to find that a cause of resentment. He had been quite content with his marriage; it made no difference to the pursuit of casual love affairs, and he frankly included his wife in the understanding that all women were desirable, except old women. Now he had suddenly lost the happy constitution of Don Juan, which is to be indifferent to a taste for special refinements in femininity. Ethel had corrupted the innocence of his palate. She had become that image of desire which elsewhere seeks its realisation in Art; but Arnold was better off to know it as a tangible thing, to be embraced with arms and legs and searched with kisses. But to possess it implied a threat hitherto undreamt of, and that was to be possessed by it. For the first time he saw his right to all women menaced, and that, too, perhaps included his wife. But he did not ask himself if he wished to be rid of his wife or if a stronger prepossession had taken her from him. Naturally, this conflict of will arrived at consciousness in the guise of some generous emotion on his wife's account.

'Don't you ever get sick of staying in this rotten little dog-box all day?' he asked suddenly.

'Me!' said his wife, surprised. 'What's wrong with it? It's a very nice cottage; better than the Hockins's, even if they do put on side and keep a sulky, but our verandah's trellised and theirs isn't, and I'm sure our garden's better kept; I look after that myself.'

'No, what I mean is, don't you ever feel you'd like to kick the whole thing to blazes and go somewhere else for a change?'

'Well, I wouldn't mind going to Ballarat now and then,' she said, meditating. 'But I will not lug two kids about the streets all day, even if everything is threepence cheaper, but I suppose the train fare makes up for it, so what's the good of talking?'

'You're a fathead,' said Arnold tolerantly.

He was now quite sure that he must disprove the assumption that love was the possession of a single woman. It was really a much simpler matter than that; as simple as the mechanism by which one possessed any woman's body, even a wife's. Generous emotion neatly masqueraded here in the guise of an assurance that his wife looked an attractive little idiot under the lamplight, and it was too damned depressing sitting about doing nothing.

So he moved across the room behind her, tilted her face up and kissed it, and slipped a hand into the warm obscurity between her breasts and chemisette.

She took the caress pleasantly but retained her sewing. Embraces exterior to the bedroom had ceased between them and she was uncertain whether this was one strayed back unexpectedly or only a passing gesture of friendliness. So, for that matter, was Arnold. He had intended otherwise, but now found the intention oozing even from the fingers that smoothed his wife's breasts. It was an uninspired caress, mocked by the faint crinkle of Ethel's letter in his pocket. As suddenly, he decided to let it pass as a casual impulse, and moved apart, to fidget about the room for a brief interval. From that he drifted down the passage, took his hat, and with a pretence of loitering on the verandah, went.

His wife ceased to sew, and sat listening with an affronted expression till the gate shut, and at that she gave a vigorous bump in her chair and wriggled her

shoulders, as if to wriggle the sensation of that caress from her nipples. All the same it was annoying and disturbing to be fiddled with like that for nothing better than a kiss. And Jerry had been a very easily satisfied husband of late. The frown which attended a prolonged stare at the lamp admitted to calculations with a marked deficit in the self-respect column of any wife. Another bump on the chair committed its total to memory. She took up her sewing and put it down again. 'Gone to the Royal, of course,' she said scornfully at the lamp, and snatched up her sewing once more.

III

But Arnold had gone straight to the Piper house and slipped, under cover of the garden shrubs, to a point that overlooked the lighted drawing-room windows. His first glance found what he sought—Ethel, standing beside the shaded lamp, polishing her finger nails on a manicure pad. If her expression meant anything it was one of interest in this trifling occupation. Hetty crossed the room behind her, and in the subdued light animosity glittered in her large eyes. She made a remark that turned Ethel's complacence into an air of elaborate unconcern. The manicure pad dropped on the table, and Ethel walked out of the room without looking at her sister. Hetty picked up the pad, glanced at it, and threw it down with a shiver, as though its touch defiled her fingers. And as people in privacy do absurd things to relieve a painful emotion she went on repeating the gesture of one who throws something from her with repugnance.

A little later the front gate opened, and Niven crossed the path within reach of Arnold's arm. He heard Hetty's voice raised conventionally in greeting, and saw Niven

presently stroll into view and loiter, with an attentive frown, at the piano. Hetty seemed to have gone. Then Niven looked up brightly and moved beyond his range of vision. Arnold failed to catch the hesitating flutter of Ethel's voice, and he thought the room was now empty. He stood biting his knuckles, wondering if he might surprise her at some other point, when she appeared suddenly at the drawing-room window. She was smiling at someone hidden from view, and for a glad moment he thought she was coming out on to the verandah. But her hand only went up to the tassel of the blind, and a second later he was staring at a blank square of illumination.

This act of discretion took him like a blow in the face. For a moment he barely controlled a mad impulse to smash open the French windows with a kick. All the inductions of jealousy were assured on the spot. That drawn blind illuminated with brilliant effect the treacheries behind it; he knew how to picture Ethel in a love embrace, and did so with damnable effectiveness, squandering lewd images on the opaque screen before his eyes.

A glance behind it would certainly have saved him these exercises in torment. Ethel was curled up on the sofa in her usual cat's attitude of slackness, while Niven sprawled in a low-seated chair across the room, twisting his signet ring and watching Ethel. The door was half open; Uncle Jobson's voice penetrated from the dining-room; footsteps intermittently traversed the passage. Besides, Hetty had put a blight on their grouping by going out with an ostentatious air of leaving them alone together, and Niven found it intolerable manufacturing small talk in this publicly connived-at privacy.

Ethel, more basely designed, suspected that Hetty went out to listen in the passage, but as a matter of fact

Hetty was sitting in the dark of her bedroom, hating them both bitterly, and thereby controlling tears.

With an effort, Niven forced himself to consider some better policy than fiddling with a signet ring. He got up, hummed a bar, and went to the window.

'A lovely night,' he murmured, opening the window. 'Come on to the verandah. It's a pity to waste good starlight.'

But Ethel made an uneasy gesture, asking him to close the window.

'Why?' asked Niven, damped at once.

'I—it's too cold.'

'It's really not cold,' protested Niven. But he closed the window, and dawdled about, irresolute. Ethel was frowning to herself, full of distant, secret thoughts. In that mood Niven found her unapproachable.

'It's not cold,' he repeated foolishly.

'No, I know that—but——'

She glanced up, conveyed by a faint nod at the passage a hint of listeners there, and closed the message with a tender, caressing smile and a little wriggle which seemed to make place for him beside her.

Niven did not take it. As usual her capacity to send a wave of emotion to him receded in a backwash of repression. He drifted back to his chair and slopped into it. What the deuce could he do in that damned room? What the deuce did he intend to do? And especially what the deuce were Ethel's exact relations with Arnold? His eyes trailed over her feline pose on the sofa, finding her limbs adorable while he tried exasperatedly to extract the truth of licentious revelations from them. 'She really hasn't the brains to carry on a deception that could leave me in this fatuous state of indecision,' he thought, muddled by her virginal re-

servations and her ruthless capacity for silence. 'I'll give up coming here,' he added mentally, and seemed to have suddenly discovered the real solution of Ethel's unknown quantity of sex. It also relieved him from the harassing need of enterprise, and he was able to pump at talk again and get through the evening.

Ethel divined well enough the fluctuations of ineptitude forced on both of them by Hetty's bric-à-brac, and she was denied the remedy already suggested by Niven. 'Curse Jerry,' she thought. 'I know he's hanging about that garden somewhere.'

But Arnold had gone, in the resolution to return and extort an interview from Ethel later. With an intolerable interval to bridge he was relieved to encounter George, Robert, and Cummings carrying bottles of beer and to join them on the road to divertissement at Old Bill Cannon's cottage.

They found the ancient propped up in bed with his green-lined hat on, for the first greeting of Autumn to Old Bill was a swinging attack of rheumatism. With the dignity of his beard enhanced by the stately edifice of his hat and his air of tense precaution against any sudden movement, he presented the appearance of an aged recluse disturbed at his orisons by revellers. This fancy was a little depreciated by the ancient himself, who poured forth maledictions in defence of the rheumatic obsession.

'Can't yew see me sufferin' here, oh Hell!' he croaked. 'Ain't I got no peace at all, all yew blinded crowd shovin' in alongside me here. Oh, Gord, damme!'

Respecting the imperial demands of Old Bill's joints, the company gathered at the table, proposing a game of cards. But Arnold now found himself involved with these gaieties against his will.

'Oh, blast cards!' he said. 'Can't you find something better to do than a lousy game of Nap?'

'What about a sing-song?' suggested George.

Arnold uttered a sound of derision in the manner of Cambrionne. He stood over Old Bill, eyeing the moribund sufferer with a malicious expression. Experimentally he flicked the ancient's toe, starting a roar of anguish from the experiment.

'Observe the wonders of science,' said Arnold. 'You touch the button and the figure speaks. The slightest pressure guaranteed to produce a sound like a turnip.'

'Gord help me oh Hell!' ejaculated Bill, lunging at Arnold with his fist. This expression of energy had such a dire effect on his joints that he was caught in the act, spell-bound, and sat with his mouth open like a fish, waiting for his agonies to subside.

'Don't do that,' said George seriously. 'I'm told that a man suffers Hell if you touch his rheumatics.'

It was a piece of information presently endorsed by Old Bill with dithyrambic passion.

'Ain't I sufferin' oh Hell!' he ranted. 'Ain't I lyin' along here crippled Oh Gord! Blasted whipper-snapper comes along here rippin' up my toe—damme—cut his heart out!'

It was some time before this belittling affair allowed a return to tolerance, and even when beer and the machinery of cards drew the group of youths about the table Old Bill remained beyond the social circle in the character of the spectre at the feast, eyeing Arnold with malevolence.

Conversation at the table—personal and ribald—had found a point of interest in what George called 'the strength' of Robert's affair with Millie.

'That won't do, you know,' said George in reply to

Robert's disavowals. 'You've been seen three or four times down the flat with her.'

'Get out,' said Robert, not displeased at these insinuations. 'Can't a man meet a girl by chance without a lot of goats like you getting funny about it?'

'Murder will out,' said George sagely. 'You can't hide things in a country town.'

'Anyway Bob's on a good wicket!' said Cummings patronisingly. 'I wouldn't mind taking on the job myself.'

'I give you my word,' said Robert handsomely. 'I hardly know the girl.'

'Tell that to old Kneebone,' said Arnold. 'Why, I was passing there the other night when he whipped out with a stick. He'll get you yet, Bob, if you don't keep an eye on him.'

Old Bill saw his opportunity and was unwise enough to take it.

'An' Bob Piper better keep an eye on yew,' he croaked, 'nosin' round after his sister, as I've heard tell.'

In the uneasy pause that followed this utterance Arnold cast such a murderous glance at Old Bill that the ancient seemed suddenly to retract into his hat, like a salted snail.

'Don't you try to be vulgar without being funny, you old blighter,' he said, and saved what remained of the situation by adding to George—'Go on, your deal!'

The game went on, but under the merest subterfuge at composure. George and Cummings exchanged glances of understanding. Arnold played phlegmatically, and Robert, who had flushed up to the ears at Old Bill's insinuation, cast furtive glances about the table, horribly ill at ease.

As the pupil of Mr. Bandparts, he failed to announce

superiority to an association of sisters with seduction. He also failed to denounce it. In fact, he could think of nothing whatever to say, and so joined the conspiracy of silence on his own behalf. Old Bill, having raised the ghost of scandal, was chiefly responsible for rattling its chains, by muttering ferociously in the seclusion of his hat, a demonstration obviously inspired by the consciousness of guilt.

There was no more beer, and they made that an excuse to break the gathering. Arnold left the others at the Town Hall corner and relieved a little of the tension. To his surprise he found his spirits lightened by the discovery that his affair with Ethel was abroad. Its problem was simplified by making a course of action inevitable. In five minutes' thought he had clarified it of its difficulties. He would clear out with Ethel. There was no need to see her to-night; he could settle minor dissensions at leisure. Whistling softly he turned for home.

CHAPTER XIV

I

If Robert had feebly shirked the problem of sex and sisters in public he was not above exhibiting in private the aspect of an outraged brother.

He nodded Ethel aside into his room next morning and there, having glared, snorted, and made other sounds of bitter enlightenment, demanded fiercely:

'What's the strength of you and Jerry Arnold, I'd dam' well like to know?'

For a flash Ethel's eyes were wide with alarm; in another flash they were cold with disdain.

'I don't know what you mean,' she said haughtily.

'It's a nice blooming thing, I don't think,' said Robert, reverting to moral irony, 'if a man can't have a game of cards without hearing his sister insulted. For two pins I'd have a go at him.'

'Go at who, you ass?'

'At Arnold. What right has he to come chasing after you?'

'If you'll kindly explain what you mean I might understand what all the fuss is about.'

'I tell you we were playing cards. Old Bill—at least, one chap said to another—to Arnold, I mean, "If Bob Piper had any sense he'd stop you chasing after his sister"—I tell you I never felt so mad in my——'

Ethel stamped her foot furiously.

'All this comes from acting in those wretched tableaux,' she exclaimed. 'I don't know that fellow Arnold. He's one of your friends. I've hardly ever spoken to him. And now I'm made the subject of scandalous

gossip about him. How dare you let people say such things about me?'

She was pale with anger, and looked on the point of vicious tears. Her passion caused Robert's pumped-up indignation to vanish.

'I never said I believed there was anything in it,' he grumbled. 'All I said was that it was a nice sort of thing for a chap——'

'Don't you dare let anyone make such a remark about me again,' exclaimed Ethel.

She hurried away, more upset by this chance shaft of scandal than all Hetty's secret discoveries. She could not conceive a sincere gesture in public; nor, for that matter, could any other creature of her generation. It was a monstrous calamity to have others know that one loved.

'It's ended,' she said furiously to herself, 'ended—ended—ended——'

To his diary Robert was better able to comport himself in the character of a pupil of Mr. Bandparts.

'Strange', he wrote, 'how a fellow objects to imputations on a sister's name, etc. Nothing in the business, but found myself damned angry. Family pride, etc. A man, however much he scorns the so-called morals, objects to scandal, as it makes him feel small.

'(Reflection.) Is it essential that a man protects his sister from being had, etc? Take the case that some stinking cow seduces her and then clears out.

'(Note.) Millie got them on this month—three packets of salts. Great relief, etc.'

By inductions strictly in the character of his calling, Mr. Bandparts annotated these secret disclosures with a comment or two.

'Piper,' he said, 'for the last month your affectation

of study has been a farce. You have been irregular in your attendance, distrait in your manner, and the expression of your eye, on special occasions, distinctly vacant. Putting text-books aside from their relation to this state of mental decrepitude, its physiological induction is inevitable. If your surplus attention is being used up entirely on one wench you'll land yourself in the usual muddle.'

'What are you getting at, J.B.?' smirked Robert.

'I am getting at a certain complexity in the world of physics which impinges on the social system. Possibly you are aware that the spiritual agitation of the physicist is concerned with the existence, or non-existence, of ether. That light, being substance, must travel on some other substance, is upset by the demonstration that it travels with equal velocity in all directions, thus conflicting with the fundamental law of mechanics in relation to friction, and causing a maddened reversion to the Newtonian conception of pure space. As a matter of fact space isn't pure. It's damned dirty. It is, in short, crammed with human souls. As the Greeks knew, you can't put a pin point between them. And half the demented things are trying to get back to Earth, through the one little crack that penetrates the wall of tangible matter, a crack, alas, that we are for ever industriously mining at, with a view to quite another species of treasure trove.

'Here, Piper, we confute the assumption that light travels on something else. Nonsense. That something must assume something else to travel on, and so on to infinity. The obvious fact is that there is no such thing as light. That is, as a thing in itself, separable from other things. There is a certain vibration in Force plus Matter which causes Matter to assume form, and what

we call Light is merely its contact in friction. *There*, Piper, the embryo has you. It is able to use that contact for its own purposes. When you, in the character of Lover, have achieved an inspired episode of frictional contact with the Beloved, you have probably been egged on by some utterly shameless embryo who proposes to use your mutual vibrations as a means of arriving at form.

'I have observed', added Mr. Bandparts conversationally, 'that these short, stocky wenches are specially liable to figure as the heroines of a domestic scandal.'

'Oh, I only know her to speak to, J.B.'

'Most men know little more than that of their wives, Piper. At the same time I am not prying into an obviously guilty reticence on your part; I merely suggest the wisdom of counteracting the Law of Physics in relation to that fourth dimensional nuisance, the embryo. Be more promiscuous, Piper; do not focus all your vibrations on one wench. You may have twenty girls with less chance of putting one in the family way than by having one girl twenty times. Practice perfects the exercise; the exercise perfects the mechanism. In your case the mechanism has some damnable social attributes—the mother is an old trollop and the father a cadaverous dog of a Christian. Possibly, however,' added Bandparts, 'you contemplate an experiment in enforced matrimony. In that case, I admire a spirit of fine recklessness.'

Robert admitted to some moments of uneasy speculation.

'I say, J.B., what do you do?' he asked.

As Mr. Bandparts had recently negotiated a dignified liaison with the barmaid at the Royal, who was almost as large as himself and twice as stately, he was able to

apply Robert's question correctly.

'I, personally, do nothing,' he said. 'That is, of course, outside my simple function of fornicator. A woman who has successfully frustrated the tadpole encroachments of the embryo for thirty years can be relied on to quell any further impertinences of *that* nature. Possibly the enterprise has been given up in despair.'

He smoked for a period of inward speculation, remarking—'Ha!—Hum!—Of course!' at intervals, in a tone of scornful comment.

'The fact is, Piper,' he said, 'this business of childbirth is an automatism in matter involved with a mental gesture of will. It is a process by which the mob automatically perpetuates itself and the conscious gesture whereby the individual separates himself from the mob. The question is, is the attribute of individuality worth the process of attaining it? You, in your imbecility, think so by not thinking about it at all. I, who think about it, do not think so. I remark to the gods that they overestimate their pet bauble of eternity. Rather than take it on the terms offered I will prefer to go somewhere else. Yet it would appear, you say, that I—even I—elected to be born. It would seem that I attached myself to two sexually active vibrations in the guise of an embryonic parasite and so crawled through a hole in space. I say it would appear so, but the truth is I have a strong suspicion that somebody pushed me in when I wasn't looking. In that case, I will one day have a word or two to say to somebody. However, being here, I'm glad to say that I never gave anyone else a chance to get here. Ha! ha!—no damned embryo ever pressed *me* into the imbecile character of Father. At least, I think so,' he added, after a pause.

'Damned lucky!' said Robert.

'Luck, Piper, is purely an effect of subconscious precaution. And in the absence of a reliable contraceptive I advise you to transfer its action to the area of the conscious.'

'No danger, J.B. I'm pretty careful.'

'Of course you are,' said Mr. Bandparts sardonically.

II

Robert arrived at his front gate that evening to find Henry emerging from it. Henry treated the gate as if it were an obstacle wilfully placed there to annoy him. He burst it open and banged it shut, and, discovering Robert, instantly transferred the motive of exasperation to him.

'What the hell do you think you are doing with yourself these days?' he demanded, coming to the point at once.

'Stewing,' said Robert in the formula of good conscience.

'Stewing!' shouted Henry. 'Loafing, you mean. You're an idle, boozing young hound. D'you know what! It's time you looked round for a job. If you can't get one at the bank you'd better come into the shop. Understand that!'

He glowered a moment and went off explosively, treating the night as another obstacle to be assaulted with violence.

'Mind your own blasted business,' muttered Robert after him.

That, in short, was what Henry was doing. The absence of Grandpa Piper enforced attention on Henry's vocation of draper in terms that deleted it of joy. His days were poisoned and his nights deranged, and Mrs. Henry Piper bore the burden of his griefs.

'I tell you what!' he would exclaim, 'this is the bally limit. We're running out of stock now, the quarter's up, and we'll have to get six hundred quids' worth on credit or ask the wholesale people to step in. They'll step in anyway if our bills aren't met on the fifteenth of next month, and that'll be the dead finish. Thank God I've no liability,' he would conclude, 'but if I ever get hold of that blithering, snuffle-busting old blighter ——'

At least the ruin of Piper and Co. would see the vengeance of a grandson.

But there came at length a wire from Uncle Thomas in Melbourne, which said, 'Person located come at once,' and Henry renounced dinner in order to catch the midday train. He was gone two days, and his return was heralded by a wire which announced, like a shout of triumph, 'Got him, home 4.40.'

The news set up a hum of thanksgiving in the house at once. Mr. Piper touched all the mantel ornaments and measured Peter's head; Peter ran into the yard and said to his dear friend Higgins, 'Grandpa's caught.'

It seemed to Peter an enchanting business, this catching of Grandpa Piper, who was presented to Peter's vision as darting about like a rat with crowds of people in pursuit of him.

The glad tidings reached Uncle Jobson in the fowl-run, who came bursting up the passage shouting, 'Ye have him, it seems.'

As the matter was none of his business, Uncle Jobson betrayed a gratuitous zest for anger on the subject of Grandpa Piper. Though there were some hours to wait for the ancient's arrival the avuncular guest arrayed himself at once for this gala day of revenge in his antique frock-coat, his indestructible bell-topper and his corn-

distended boots. It was his intention that the prodigal's return should see an uncle's anger on the railway station.

Peter was there, too, an interested spectator. He had expectations of seeing Grandpa lugged from his carriage, bound hand and foot, like a trussed fowl. Though disappointed in this novelty, he had the pleasure of being first home to announce the captive's arrival.

'They've got him in the cab,' said Peter, who had run swiftly ahead of that lumbering vehicle to bring the glad news.

'Henry is so impetuous,' said Mrs. Piper, who was peeping from the front-room window with Hetty. 'I do hope he will not be rough with your grandfather.'

The cab pulled up at the door and for a moment nothing happened. Then there shot from it a hat, not gaily as hats are thrown to express delight, but violently, as under the impetus of passion.

That this hat was the property of Uncle Jobson was admitted by that gentleman's swift descent in pursuit of it.

He was followed by Henry, making signals of command at someone in the cab. These proving ineffective, Henry dashed back into the vehicle with the obvious intention of doing murder, while Uncle Jobson, standing on the step, appeared to assist as second murderer by reaching violently into the cab.

The result of these joint endeavours was the sudden production of Grandpa Piper, very much as a limp rabbit is produced from a conjurer's hat.

The ancient had suffered a marked depreciation since his flight; some powerful agent of vitiation had been at work on him. His eyes goggled, his chin waggled, his lip dribbled and his nose had suddenly become three sizes too large. A vigorous thump from Henry had

crammed his hat down over his ears. At the sight of him supported between Henry and Uncle Jobson fancy at once conceived two intemperate undertakers carrying a corpse.

'Where'll ye have him?' demanded Uncle Jobson, as though it were now merely a question of dumping the carcass in a convenient hole.

In a flutter of politic reassurances Mrs. Piper had them deposit it in the bedroom.

'I'm sure your grandfather is tired after his journey,' said Mrs. Piper, industriously keeping up appearances before the remorseless exposure of Grandpa Piper's senility.

He sat where they had flopped him on the bed, inanely limp and absurdly obscured by his hat. Even the vitality of glaring had renounced him.

Uncle Jobson made menacing sounds at him, with the unholy zest of an inquisitor who has now got his victim on the rack.

'Ye'd rin off, would ye, ah hah!—ye would, ye would. Ye'd give us the slip, ye would, ah ha, y'rah——' began Uncle Jobson, but Mrs. Piper nipped this war chant short by closing the door on its inspiration.

'I'll send Bridget to undress your grandfather,' said Mrs. Piper, leading him to the dining-room, where Mr. Piper was rapidly counting his one, two, three, four, fives, while taking brisk anguished runs between the sideboard and the fire-place.

Mrs. Piper seated herself with a smiling composure, prepared to express an optimistic view of Grandfather Piper's conduct. Uncle Jobson, with his bell-topper gripped in his hands and his mouth agape, waited with avidity for details of a salacious nature. Peter, who had sidled into the room, was instantly ordered out again.

'I tell you, I've had a fine time with that old blighter,' said Henry, throwing down his hat with drama. 'I never thought an old josser of eighty could put up such a fight. Had to carry him out of the hotel. I even had to get the cabman to help me unhook him from the cab at Spencer Street. Wouldn't get into the carriage even. He's been hanging on to everything he could get his clutches on, like a bally limpet. Not a word out of him, mind you. Simply hooking himself on to things——'

'But where has he been?' exclaimed Hetty.

'I'm coming to that,' said Henry significantly. 'Uncle Thomas got on to his tracks. He's been staying at that big family hotel at Portsea, down the bay—staying there with his daughter.'

'His daughter!' exclaimed Mrs. Piper. 'What daughter?'

Henry looked cynically at his audience, prepared to shatter their confidence in human nature.

'Blooming fine daughter, I don't think,' he said. 'What do you say to his having cleared out with Maggie Tregaskis, that religious maniac of a housemaid of yours?'

'But—impossible,' murmured Mrs. Piper, dazed by this revelation.

'Never tell me,' exclaimed Uncle Jobson, almost suffocated at such a treat of scandal.

'She's a cool customer, that one,' said Henry. 'I don't know how much she's got out of him, but it's something pretty solid. I've been going through his cheque butts, and as far as I can see he's done in something over seven hundred pounds on her.'

'But Maggie Tregaskis,' exclaimed Mrs. Piper, overwhelmed. Mr. Piper remained staring at Henry with a

dumbfounded expression, deprived of fives and measurings.

Uncle Jobson merely gaped, surrendering speech to the sensation of incredible things. Hetty alone remained composed, prepared to believe anything to the dishonour of mankind.

'We might have expected it,' she said scornfully. 'The old beast didn't spend most of his time in the kitchen for nothing.'

'But the money?' exclaimed Mr. Piper, coming out of his trance. 'You say——'

'I say as far as I can make out he's spent something like seven hundred pounds on her,' said Henry. 'There's no proof, of course, but where else could it have gone? Some of it went in expenses, no doubt, but she got the rest of it.'

'Seven—hunder—pounds!' roared Uncle Jobson, suddenly finding his voice. 'Never tell me ye let the bitch out of your hands with all that money!'

'What could I do?' said Henry. 'It wasn't paid to her personally. The cheques are drawn to self or bearer. She took care of that, no doubt.'

'Ye let her go!' exclaimed Uncle Jobson, exasperated. 'Ye no called the police in an' gave her in charge!'

'Of course I didn't,' retorted Henry. 'I'm not such a fool as to give her that chance to come at me for damages. But I got to her, of course. Oh, I got to her,' he exclaimed, flushing with anger at the recollection. 'I told her one or two facts about herself. But she never turned a hair. Denied getting the money, of course. Said she'd been looking after him, as a nurse. Said she wasn't responsible if he registered her as his daughter. Practically told me to go to the devil. Told me if I wasn't satisfied to go to law about it. She actually,' ex-

claimed Henry, at the crescendo of outraged commercial dignity, worsted in its financial seat of honour, 'actually had the immortal rind to say she was a respectable woman, and if I had anything more to say to her I'd better say it to her solicitor.'

'And where is she now?' exclaimed Mrs. Piper.

'I don't know and I don't care,' said Henry. 'She put on her hat and walked off, and that's the last I saw of her. Go to law! She knew dashed well we'd never go to law, to wash all our dirty linen in public. She's gone and the money's gone and that's the end of it.'

Uncle Jobson found himself unable to endure this abnegation of revenge. His exasperation mounted to his head, causing his brain to go as red as his face. Under pressure of asphyxiating or exploding he did a demented thing. He put his bell-topper down on the table and knocked it under the sofa with a violent blow.

'Seven hunder pounds thrown in the gutter!' he roared. 'An' you no more than lettin' yon devilish wench have it for the askin'. I'd no bear it. I'd grapple her and thrapple her. I'd take and wring the neck of her,' ranted Uncle Jobson, making infuriated gestures at the air, as though nipping imaginary noses and clutching imaginary throats.

'I really can't believe—such a religious girl,' exclaimed Mrs. Piper, amidst the ruins of optimism. 'So quiet, so ladylike. If she *really* has the money, of course—but perhaps—if she were approached carefully—with tact——'

Henry remained implacable to any such weak hopes of restitution or revenge.

'You don't suppose I haven't made all enquiries,' he said. 'I've seen the bank people confidentially and I've

seen the wholesale people. He hasn't paid them a penny. He's paid his hotel bill, and that's all the outlay I can locate.'

'But perhaps your grandfather might explain.'

'Try him,' said Henry significantly. 'I wish you luck. No. You can write that seven hundred down a bad debt. The question now to be settled is—what's to be done about the business?'

Mr. Piper counted five, mesmerised by Henry's eye.

'You wouldn't take my advice and force him to sign over while you had the chance,' went on Henry, confirmed a ruthless prophet. 'Now you see the result. I don't know what capital he has got left, but I doubt if it's enough to meet our liabilities. And we've got to pay the wholesale people at once, or else——'

He made a gesture significant of a drapery establishment in ruins. Mr. Piper ran to the sideboard and back again. For a moment his hand hovered irresolutely over the teapot, as if selecting a spot from which to take its dimensions nicely.

'The wholesale people—we owe them?' he asked.

'£310 Wicks—£250 A.J. & Co.—£290 Sniggs and Hitchens—£850 in all,' said Henry.

Mr. Piper in despair measured the teapot. Uncle Jobson made a sound in his throat, like a rooster which was about to crow, but concluded to think better of it. Henry maintained an air of strict impartiality, the effect of a determination to have his own way in the matter.

The height of the teapot, the circumference of the sugar basin, and the length of the tea-tray having failed Mr. Piper for commercial inspiration he gazed helplessly at his son.

'What do you advise?' he asked.

Henry was waiting for this admission of parental in-

capacity. Behind his profundity lurked the cunning of the business man, that descendant of Phœnician pirates.

'The question is,' he said, 'are you prepared to make him sign over the business now, in favour of you and me? An equal partnership, you know, between you—and—me?'

'But do you think we can manage?'

'Well,' said Henry with a non-committal air, 'it's a chance, but with management we should squeeze through. I don't mind admitting that I've put it confidentially to the wholesale people that it was to their advantage to extend our credit. I told them enough of the situation to let them understand that you and I had no liability, and if they went for him he'd probably crack up and they'd be in a hole. They're agreeable to carry on if we take over the liability, with a bill over the stock, of course. But it's got to be on the lines of a partnership, as far as I'm concerned. I saw Uncle Fred coming through, and he'll be out to-morrow to fix the business up. I've a few hundred of my own,' added Henry, who dabbled in mining shares, 'and I'll put them in if necessary, but it comes to this'—he thumped the table with sudden menace—'you people here will have to go slow for a bit. You'll have to ease up on your expenses. There's too much money spent here altogether. And young Bob had better go to work. If he won't go into the shop he can go into the bank. And you can go on doing without an extra servant. You've had enough of housemaids to last you for a bit. Hetty can do her work, anyway. I'll have to economise myself, of course——' His dictatorial eye rested on Uncle Jobson for a moment, as though reviewing him in the light of a possible economy, but Uncle Jobson cleared his throat with such a peremptory sound that the

financier merely added, 'It means cutting down expenses all round, for a year at least.'

'An' high time, too,' said Uncle Jobson severely. 'Am I no for ever saying that the waste goin' on here is simply deevilish?'

III

Henry was of that common order of financial diplomat who depreciates an article in order to cheapen its market value.

It was true that Piper and Co. staggered on its foundations, in order to suffer in secret a rehabilitation, and emerged regenerated as Piper and Son. But if business activity were counted in order of precedence the legend might in more reason have been Son and Piper, for Henry was the officious partner in these changes.

Round the moribund carcass of Grandpa Piper the elders of the family were grouped like conspirators about a senile potentate, concerned for the succession of his depreciated crown.

There were secret conferences and a vigorous exchange of letters, which agitated the remotest circle of aunts and uncles. Uncle Fred, the family solicitor, was constantly in and out of this business, and a legal flavour tainted the air. With two such catchpoles as Henry and Uncle Fred at his heels there was nothing left for Grandpa Piper but to sign his abdication to the drapery business. The ancient displayed some ghostly remnants of density in vain. Henry was Cromwellian in thrusting upon his grandfather this final act of resignation.

But a more rapacious dun than Henry was after the ancient. He was palsied, decrepit, and obtuse to the evidence of life about him. The upright posture was all

that remained to him, as if his legs alone had outlived the dotage of his mind.

Uncle Jobson fell into a passion every time he caught sight of the doddering figure. The thought of all that money squandered in secret venery was not to be endured without an instant uproar.

'Aha! Ye dribblin' old rantipole,' he raved. 'Ha rah! ye doighted old billygoat. Ye'd be gallivantin', ye would; ye'd be off on the randy-dan ye would. Ye'd be gropin' at the petticoats, ye would; ye'd be winkin' and blinkin' and fiddlin' and diddlin' among the wimmen, ye would ye would ye would ye would ye would——'

No whisper of zephyr maledictions reached Grandpa Piper's perfect coma; not even the wraith of a maddened uncle brandished a fist before his nose.

True, he was found one evening standing on Uncle Jobson's hat, but that was no evidence that he knew the hat was there.

Even when Uncle Jobson's eight other bell-toppers were found in a neat crushed row and Grandpa Piper dozing upright in their presence Uncle Jobson's frenzy, which disturbed the household for a week, failed to extract so much as a blink of satisfaction from his dim old eye.

Otherwise, the dissolution of Grandpa Piper came as a great relief to the family, even announced by Uncle Jobson's bellows amid the ruins of nine pot hats.

From afar Robert paused in his record of life's serious affairs to mention the event in his diary.

'Grandpa Whiskers back, having been collared in a pub with our slavey Maggie. Hellish row, as it appears he has done in seven hundred quid on her. The affair surprises me, as I had regarded her as evidently cracked on religion. George, however, tells me that her old

woman sneaked sheets from their place when doing the washing.

'N.B.—In smoking a cigar with George to-day I smoked mine right down to the butt without letting the ash fall. He did the same, but I beat him by an eighth of an inch.'

So much for the importance of the family finances as measured against the exquisite precision of holding a cigar.

CHAPTER XV

I

At the far end of the Piper fruit garden, overgrown with honeysuckle, Arnold and Ethel were talking at midnight.

He had come to the bedroom window and brought her out, huddled in a kimono and whispering breathless protests. The night was starlit, luminous and still, and the faint murmur of their voices sounded isolated and intimate in a silent world.

'No, it's not a bit impossible,' Arnold was saying. 'It's the simplest thing in the world. I've got the whole thing fixed. When the time comes all you'll have to do will be to put on your hat and walk to the station. You can leave the rest to me.'

'Put the idea out of your head,' said Ethel angrily. 'I won't hear of such madness.'

'You'll get used to it presently. It's only because the idea's fresh to you that you think it's difficult. This is what it roughly amounts to. I shall raise five hundred quid——' He hesitated a moment, and went on, 'I'll leave half for my wife and we'll take the other half and hook it. We'll go to Sydney. I've got a pal there in business and I can walk into a good billet the moment we arrive. If you like we'll go for a run to the Islands first, Honolulu or Fiji. My wife will divorce me for desertion and we'll get married.'

Ethel kept shaking her head, impatient at these compact details.

'It's no use,' she kept exclaiming. 'I'd no more think of doing it than flying.'

'Why not? What have you got against it?'

'But—Good Heavens—you talk as if it were nothing. I don't know what put such a mad scheme in your head. I won't think of it—I won't—I won't—I won't.'

Arnold debated the urgency of her insistence for a moment in silence, putting his ideas in order to combat it.

'Look here,' he said, 'you wrote saying we weren't to meet again. I take no notice of that because it's absurd. I can't live without seeing you and I won't. I never knew what I was up against till I had to face the idea of losing you. I've got you and I'm going to keep you. Very well, there's nothing for it but to make a certainty of the business by clearing out. We can't hang on any longer like we've been doing without setting every old fowl in the place cackling. Don't you think you'd be happy with me?'

'It's not that——'

'Don't you trust me? Don't you love me enough to want to live with me?'

'That's not the point——'

'It is. It's the whole thing. You know what we've been to each other. Don't you want to stick to me?'

'Of course I do,' said Ethel peevishly. 'You know I do, but——'

She tried to find words to express a magnified sense of social complications thrust on her by his proposal, but she was really alarmed—more alarmed than social complications could justify. Deeper down, it was self identity that found itself threatened by a lover who demanded the right to dispossess all other lovers. She felt the need to resist him and a more urgent need to excuse it.

'You don't seem to think,' she exclaimed. 'The muddle would be simply awful; everybody gabbling about us and all the people here in a fury. And besides, there are your wife and children, too. You'd want them—you know you would. It would be a rotten thing for them.'

Arnold scowled; this was obvious duplicity. Ethel hated his wife and would have seen her on a gridiron with composure. He reached for a simpler induction to unravel her insincerity.

'Own up,' he said roughly. 'You are after Niven, if you haven't got him already.'

'What rubbish—I hardly know the man.'

'Of course. That's why he came and tried to pick a row with me over you——'

'What!!!'

'Yes, and that was the day after I got your letter. He wanted to know what I meant by hanging round here at night.'

'That's Hetty,' exclaimed Ethel furiously. 'The utter sneak!'

'Ah, you don't like that,' said Arnold, enraged. 'Didn't want him to know. Hardly know the man! I was in your garden one night when he called and I saw you smile at him, just before you pulled the blind down. What did you pull that blind down for? You thought there was an even chance I might be in the garden. And that smile—I know that smile of yours——'

'What nonsense—as if pulling down a blind meant anything. I tell you he comes to see Hetty; I would not be surprised if they weren't engaged.'

Arnold gloomed for a moment, at a loss for effective accusations.

'Oh, to hell with him anyway,' he said. 'He's only a damned clothes prop. I don't care a tinker's curse one

way or the other; we're going to clear out together and that will settle his hash, and settle everything else too—'

'Oh, shut up!'

She fastened her teeth in his neck and nipped viciously. The protest was effective, for it shot Arnold into jealousy's other facet, a desire to hurt and adore a beloved body. He caught and held her lips with his, a pressure as fiercely returned by Ethel that thrilled them both with a delicious antagonism. Like two wrestlers their bodies interlocked to a perfect poise of equality and resistance, which very simply transferred aggression from words to limbs.

Also, it peculiarly deferred importance in complications, social and spiritual. All Arnold said an hour later at parting was, 'Don't bother; you'll come all right when the time comes. It will take me about a month to fix everything up. After that——'

'Oh, do shut up talking nonsense,' said Ethel, and pushed him to a belated departure.

II

Niven stayed away for one Sunday's dinner and came the next. By a judicious disposal of visits he proposed to reinstate himself as a friend of the family and thereby avert any more exposures of his incompetence as a lover. That is to say, he assured himself that he was not going to make a fool of himself over a jill-flirt of Ethel's type. Therefore he lingered on the verandah after dinner with Henry discussing the forestry reserve, the new dam at Mullocky Creek, the brickworks' muddle, and other small town politics. Nor did he then drift into the drawing-room, where Ethel was already in possession of the sofa, but dawdled about the garden with Mrs. Piper, discovering a sensible interest in

autumn blooms.

Ethel gave these latent antics an interval to disprove themselves and then retired to her bedroom. It would never do to let him find her waiting in the drawing-room. Just outside her window Mrs. Piper was expressing consternation to Niven.

'I don't know how it is, but someone is perpetually trampling my beds lately. I'm sure that wasn't done yesterday, for I watered this bed last night. Just look, Doctor, my best double chrysanthemum quite ruined.'

Ethel grimaced to herself and peeped cautiously through the curtains. Niven was attending to her mother's annoyance with polite abstraction, but suddenly he glanced up from the trampled flowers to her window. His eyes were blank; he was not looking but thinking.

Ethel dodged aside and remained for a period, also thinking. Its effect was that with an air of decision she put on her hat and gloves and without advertising her departure slipped through the back way and walked swiftly off.

Hetty had gone to her own bedroom after dinner, pursuing the perverse policy of lacerating pride in secret as the scornful pretext for abandoning claims to a lover. But she listened intently, for all that, in the direction of the drawing-room, for the signal of Niven's return to Ethel. He was still talking in the garden with her mother. Then those exchanges ceased, and a little later Mrs. Piper's voice arrived from the kitchen, with old Bridget's.

Hetty went cautiously to the passage and listened, but still the drawing-room was silent. There was, obviously, no one there. She pushed open the door and uttered a surprised sound, for Niven was alone. He was

standing at the window, pulling at his underlip and staring dejectedly at the garden, but he turned to arrest Hetty as she drew back.

'Look here, Hetty,' he said, 'I wish you wouldn't avoid me. There honestly is no need to, I assure you.'

That frankly encompassed all reservations and seemed to lift the earth off Hetty's shoulders but it was a moment before she could adjust herself to an intonation which would not imply relief.

'It's the devil, you know, the way we all complicate simple relations with a suspicion of ulterior motives,' went on Niven. 'Can't we put up a signboard now and then of "No danger. I'm a harmless person pretending to be exactly what I am".'

Hetty laughed and at once found her voice in working order.

'I doubt if it would work,' she said. 'Did you ever know anyone yet who found such an easy way to tell the truth about themselves?'

'Well, if we're such capable liars that we find an easy way to express the things we don't feel I should think a little practice could reverse the process.'

'Oh, liars, of course, but that's self-protective, isn't it?'

'I begin to doubt it, unless we are concerned to protect ourselves from being at ease with ourselves, which implies other selves. I really can't find anything very ingenious in a process that masks a real emotion with its opposite expression, and then leaves us to an intellectual exercise of finding out which was the mask and which the real face——'

They were at ease again. Niven settled himself in a chair, Hetty put matches and an ash tray at his elbow;

the charmed security of talk was established. Niven talked well that afternoon, talked himself back into self-esteem. And Hetty was expert in supplying his masculinity with that essential ingredient. She performed as the complement of his intellectual superiority; their voices even exchanged the false inflection of conscious familiarity.

When Niven left at five he swung his stick and hummed a tune. It had recurred to him at intervals to wonder where Ethel was, but he easily lost that preoccupation in the relief from emotion that subtly attended her presence.

He turned the Fire Brigade corner and stopped abruptly. Ethel was coming up from the direction of the creek, on the opposite side of the road. She was hurrying, as if to make up a delay in time, and did not see him till the last moment, and then her recognition was palpably embarrassed—a little half smile, a furtive nod, and she was past and hurrying on again.

Niven continued on his way, but he no longer swung his stick, as if his exhilaration had run out at the ferrule with which he prodded carefully placed holes in the gravel path. Ethel's haste and her obvious reluctance at meeting sufficiently advertised the fact that she had been somewhere in secret that afternoon. So she had. There was a point on the heights that overlooked the intervening roofs to the Piper front gate and permitted a calculated encounter with anyone emerging therefrom.

But Ethel was discreet in these age-worn devices. When Niven called during the week she sidled into the drawing-room after Hetty was well established there with Niven and blighted something of their newly restored ease by her inattentive pose on the sofa. But she

took the opportunity while Niven was singing to sidle out again and leave a blank space as effective as her presence. For Sunday's contribution to a suspended emotion she vanished again after dinner, but returned this time before Niven's departure. The weather had turned cold that week, and there was a fire in the drawing-room. Hetty had gone for the tea-tray and Niven was seated alone, and his self-esteem had gone up the chimney, for he was staring morosely at the fire in quest of it.

Ethel wore a little black hat with a gold plume. Her face was delicately flushed with exercise in the cold air, and her chin was sunk in a mass of black fur. She came softly into the room, gave him a faint nod, and put one small foot to the fire, while Niven watched her with a palpable sneer.

'Enjoy your walk?' he asked pointedly.

'Very,' said Ethel, snuggling into her furs.

She continued to watch the vapour rise from her damp sole in a tranquil abstraction. When Hetty came in with the tea a few moments later she went out and left them together.

Niven found a sleepless night, ridden by hated pictures of Ethel, the limit of his endurance. He came back to the house the next afternoon, the muscles of his face rigid, his eye austere with decision. Ethel saw him pass the fence and he arrived to find her loitering on the verandah. There was no convention of greeting in his address or hesitation at its confession.

'I want to see you, Ethel, but we can't talk here. Will you come for a walk to-morrow afternoon?'

'If you like,' said Ethel after a pause.

'I'll meet you on the hill at three—will that suit?'

Ethel considered the arrangement with a faint frown.

'No,' she said, 'I can't come to-morrow, but I don't mind Wednesday.'

'Very well,' said Niven. He hesitated a moment, and adding, 'Don't forget,' departed abruptly.

Ethel glanced into the drawing-room, but it was empty. Relieved, she returned to her bedroom, to stand before her mirror and spend an hour considering how its inspired reflection might seem adored from this angle or from that.

This had fallen out very nicely, for Arnold was going to Melbourne on Wednesday. He had told her so at their last meeting, implying that this journey predestined their flight together.

'Everything is very nicely arranged,' he said. 'I've had the shop painted and filled with new stock.'

Ethel refused to hear anything about it. There was a squabble every time they met. To Arnold this contest of wills was purely an affair of action. He had conceded to action because of Ethel's funk of present discovery; now she appeared to urge that as a triviality compared with a proposal that openly evaded it.

'What does it matter?' she insisted. 'Hetty won't do anything. I know that now. Besides, it's only her word against mine. If you would only have the sense to be a little more careful and not take idiotic risks, we could go on meeting—sometimes——'

'Sometimes be damned,' exclaimed Arnold. 'That leaves you in the open for anyone else to take or to take anyone, with me crawling round on my belly to sneak a chance of meeting you. I won't, that's flat.'

'But you don't understand,' said Ethel, exasperated by this assurance that he did.

'I don't care,' she said to her reflection in the mirror. 'He will have his own way. Let him.'

III

The afternoon was fine when Ethel walked out to meet Niven, though the ground was moist from recent rain. A brisk wind had rolled up the grey morning clouds and blown them high and white into a deep blue sky.

Ethel wore her furs, and a black feathered hat that shaded her eyes. Her costume of that era, full about the shoulders, tight at the body, and frilled below the knees, was of a soft dark material edged with white, a setting which framed her little fair face and silver-gilt hair with an immaculate effect.

Niven met her on the hill. Possibly he had spent as much care over his toilet as she had. His grey tweed suit, the setting of his tie, his grey gloves and perfect boots were spiritual props against Destiny's derision, but he was so nervous that his expression was quite rigid, and they only glanced a greeting and walked on over the hill without speaking.

Ethel's distrait air allowed the tension to endure, levying a blackmail on his equanimity without compunction. A cart track curved downwards towards the gully and they followed it at a pace set by Niven's embarrassment.

'Dreadful, isn't it, this sort of silence,' he said at last. 'It always attacks me when I have half a dozen things to say and don't know which comes first. We are walking a bit fast, aren't we?'

'*You* are.'

'My fault, was it. I didn't notice.'

They hesitated and went on at a stroll, which allowed Niven to rearrange ideas pressed upon him as the only approach to Ethel.

'You and Hetty are not good friends at present, are you?'

'What makes you think that?'

'It seems apparent.'

'I suppose it is. We are not good friends, really.'

'Why?'

Ethel shook her head, implying vagaries too trivial to bother over.

'Tell me, Ethel—you fell out over something at our "Faust" show?'

'Oh, that!' said Ethel, recollecting a forgotten triviality. 'Oh, yes, but that was over nothing. She made a mistake and we had a squabble, but there was nothing in it.'

'Really?'

Ethel dismissed significance in that topic. She walked on with a slight frown, obviously thinking of other matters.

'Of course, Hetty does hate me,' she said at last. 'I've known that ever since you came to the house.'

'I?'

'But it only came out that day she found us talking in the drawing-room.'

Memory presented Niven with Hetty's face on that occasion and confused him.

'But surely', he said, 'between Hetty and me there never was a real margin for mistakes——'

'Oh, Hetty makes mistakes when she wants to,' said Ethel, and left it at that.

Niven found his preoccupations of approach had gone astray. Duplicity from Hetty! Possibly. But duplicities elsewhere? He walked along in silence, boring precise holes in the damp earth with his stick. From under the brim of her hat Ethel noted the return of

restraint that tightened his lips and thinned his profile.

As usual, silence did its fell work with him. He found himself bogged at every road but one, and nervousness pushed him into it.

'I'll have to ask you, Ethel—is there anything between you and that fellow Arnold?'

Ethel gave him a scornful glance and that was all he got. It pressed upon him instantly the fatuity of his position; to make a lover's demand without the authority of a lover. In a panic he fell to protestations and excuses.

'But Ethel!—Listen!—I know I haven't the right to—you must understand my—it's not a claim, but a—the position is intolerable when—if it really is a case of——'

No sentence could find its end and he made a despairing gesture. 'What the devil could I do, with Hetty's assurance that she knew you were lovers. She said he came to your place at night and—Oh! damnation!—Look here, Ethel.'

But Ethel refused to look or to hear either. Her face was a little frigid mask in a setting of black fur; nothing could reach her austere repudiation of him. He was so morally at her mercy that he dropped a glove and saw it fall but could not connect with an impulse to recover it. She walked faster, obviously to escape his detested presence.

'I suppose you never hesitated to believe that rubbish,' she exclaimed suddenly and again sealed herself against approach from him.

'I never said I believed it.'

His dejection was complete; it sought for any terms to put sexual irresolution under her feet and let her trample on it.

'I don't believe it, Ethel. I'm a fool. I've made a

botch of this business. Why couldn't I have said that I loved you and left it at that?'

He received, at that, the impression of her fine eyes, enigmatical and fleeting, but the brim of her hat was as swiftly lowered, and then he saw only her lips, which trembled and filled him with an idiotic compunction. He took her arm, earnestly trying to reach her eyes. They had stopped, but Ethel refused to look at him.

'Ethel,' he said, 'I'm tormentedly in love with you. You know that, don't you?'

Ethel shook her head, and a little pained intake of the breath reached him.

'Oh, love!' she said bitterly. 'What's the good of talking of love with your mind full of that poisonous stuff about me?'

'But, Ethel, on my knees, I don't believe it. I was an imbecile to mention it. But you know that jealousy tries to believe the worst. Forgive me, Ethel—Ethel——'

Ethel was looking into far, unhappy thoughts, but her body reached his and there relaxed; he felt its weight and put an arm round her waist. Bending, he was able delicately to brush her cheek with his lips.

Ethel turned her face to him, her eyes wide open and astonished to find they had reached this intimate contact. The movement also brought her lips against his. He kissed them and straightway achieved a paradise of softness, sweetness, fragrance, and unutterable tenderness.

'My darling!' he kept repeating, striving to utter it between kisses.

Ethel left it all to him. Her complicity to love was a shy happiness, a neophyte learning charmed mysteries from an adept.

The pose perfected Niven's self-respect, by handing initiative to the male. All he desired to believe of Ethel was assured in a restored belief in himself. It was a simple translation to find Ethel the condition as well as the cause of his own emotion for her. As he proved himself a lover who found women fragile, delicately sensed, to be adored in an extravagant solicitude of phrase, what possible relation could the poisonous infamies of jealousy have to such a woman?

They loitered about the bush track all the afternoon, stopping to embrace and drifting on again. The ground was too wet to sit on, and that suited both of them. Niven desired no other enterprise but the release of his suppressed adoration in words, and that left Ethel at ease to perfect the impression of her graces on him, to murmur an odd sentence when needed and to absorb the Narcissus charm of all the tender things he said about her.

Only once an admission escaped that these two arrived at love by different roads. Ethel had taken off his ring and slipped it on her finger, to admire her hand in an adornment of his. Niven, too, admired his ring's new setting.

'Keep it,' he said. 'Let me seal a beloved possession.'

'Oh no!' said Ethel. 'They would know at once.'

She pressed the ring back on his finger with an uneasy emotion which gave Niven something to reflect on for a moment.

'But, look here, Ethel,' he said, 'we can't keep this a secret. Besides, why should we? I want you, you know. I must see you. We can't meet here without the town knowing, and you know what your house is. If we don't acknowledge this'—he kissed her—'it will be acknowledged for us. Don't you think a conventional

engagement is the simplest way out?'

Ethel did not think so; the convention appeared to alarm her strangely.

'Oh, I couldn't,' she said urgently. 'Think of all the silly gabble, and the family standing round looking at us. No, I couldn't—I couldn't. And you forget Hetty. She's already accused me of stealing you from her——'

'I don't believe you ever thought I was worth stealing,' said Niven, pleased by the admission. But he had forgotten Hetty and wished to forget her. 'Perhaps it's best—for the present, anyway,' he said.

Restored to her pose of submissive femininity, Ethel relaxed again into his embraces.

IV

She went to bed that night charmed with her new lover and her own felicity in love. 'After all, I always get what I want,' she thought sleepily, to a lullaby of experimental episodes which already exploited Niven as lover and herself as his beloved.

Though it was three hours later she seemed to wake straight from that to the clang of the fire-bell in her ears. She sprang from bed to pull aside the window curtains, and a diffused radiance filled the room. Over the black ridges of the house-tops in the main street a broad flame licked upwards and a ruthless crackling of timber reached her, with the sound of running feet.

The family were gathered at the front gate, watching the spectacle of flame with apprehensive pleasure, and a group of people hurrying past the house sent a fresh note of confusion to Ethel's mind.

'It's Arnold's,' she heard a voice say, and the mass of flame lit a vague suspicion in her mind. From that she was startled by a whisper at her elbow.

'It's all right, don't move,' it said, and there was Arnold in the semi-darkness of the garden. Ethel could only stare helplessly. He was hatless and wore an old sweater from which came a pungent smell of burnt wool. One arm was bare to the shoulder and his face was smudged like a coal heaver's.

'I say, give me the wet end of a towel, will you?' he whispered. 'I'm in a filthy mess.'

The creature of helplessness, Ethel dipped a towel in the jug and passed it to him, revolving incredibilities while he swabbed the grime from his face.

'But your shop——' she exclaimed at length.

'That's all right,' said Arnold reassuringly. 'I say, I've made a mess of your towel. You'd better hide it.'

'But you—you never went to Melbourne.'

'Yes, I did.' He stepped across the path and glanced over the bushes at the verandah.

'You'll be seen,' exclaimed Ethel.

'It's all right. They're too busy watching my fire. Our fire, I mean,' he added, slipping an arm round Ethel's waist. Through her thin nightdress she could feel his resilient muscles, still tense with recent exertions.

'*You* did it,' she exclaimed, all other considerations at the mercy of this revelation.

Arnold laughed subtly.

'Give me a kiss,' he said. 'That's what I really came for. I can't stop, anyway. I've ridden fifty miles since ten o'clock and I've got the same fifty to ride back before morning.'

He put a leg over the sill and raised himself to get a better view of the fire. The flame was at its height, for the next-door shops were ablaze, and the sound of burning timber made a continuous roaring. On the flat

ridge of a roof little helmeted figures moved with the activity of disturbed ants, and a thin jet of water shot at intervals above the blaze, like a firework.

'Pump away,' said Arnold. 'You won't get that job over in a hurry. Three tins of kerosene go a long way when you use a garden squirt.'

Ethel refused congratulation on the success of this experiment in combustion. She stared from Arnold to the fire and back again, and uttered a little impatient sound.

'It's all right,' he reassured her. 'Fused wires will explain that little joke, and I've got a good alibi. Dined in town with a crowd to-night and took a room at an hotel. I'll be back in it to-morrow morning for breakfast. It means catching a train well away from here that will land me in town before six. I've got a change of clothes strapped to the bike. The fire nearly beat me, though. It was such a long time starting that I went back to have a look at it, and the moment I opened the door the dam' place seemed to blow up. I was soaked with kerosene, and it nearly got me. Five hundred quid honestly earned, anyway.'

He laughed, kissed her, and vanished across the garden, too preoccupied with the stimulus of action to note her singular apathy to its charm. She stared after him without emotion. His vitality threatened to bear down all resistance, and aroused to resist that danger she sat for a long time on the bed, twisting at her hair, and untwisting responsibility for the gestures of others from her mind.

'He's mad,' she said at last to the red glow of light beyond the housetops.

CHAPTER XVI

I

ETHEL and Niven met in secret to dawdle and embrace about the bush and leave other intimacies to time and place and an inspired voluptuousness. Niven was that type of lover, and Ethel found it charming to consume a love affair slowly, as children eat all round a tart, keeping the jam part last.

These meetings saved them evasions in the house, but Sunday's dinner was not to be avoided, and Niven found it a trying experiment in pumped-up interests, with Hetty seated next to him and Ethel stuck away on the other side of the voiceless Mrs. Henry Piper, who was always looking secretly at him, or at Hetty, or at Ethel, and being caught at it.

Added to these distractions was the peculiar conduct of Grandpa Piper, who appeared at his elbow to bestow a special confidence.

'Food is very dear,' he said in tones of ghostly warning.

The agitations impressed on Grandpa Piper's senility were announced here. Out of vacuity, density, and partly suspended animation he had emerged in a prodigal world, where all the money had been extorted by rapacious spendthrifts who squandered it on food.

He refused to eat—at least in public, and the subterfuge of this martyrdom was to put his food on a tray in the passage. This he smuggled secretly into his bedroom, under a newspaper. If caught in the act his formula was ready. 'Glancing at the newspaper—the newspaper,' he would explain. Pilferings from the

pantry, neatly wrapped up in parcels, were found among his personal effects and removed under agitated protests from the aged economist.

'For a rainy day,' he exclaimed to Mrs. Piper, when the remains of a leg of mutton, six potatoes, and a boiled egg were being extracted from under his bed.

Now, with his Sunday's hoard stowed away for a secret debauch, he appeared at table to endure the torture of watching others eat while imposing on them the spectacle of a martyr's renunciation of food.

Niven, as a food consumer not actively associated with other rapacities, was singled out for tidings of a foodless world.

'Too poor to eat,' said the ancient in his ear.

Groans attended the passing of plates. That food should be consumed at all was admitted profligacy, but that Uncle Jobson should be detected feeding an abhorrence not to be endured. Some grasping motions at this hated diner hinted at taking his plate away by force. Defrauded there by Uncle Jobson's glare the avuncular feeder was pointed out to Niven with horror.

'Wolfing it down,' said Grandpa Piper in ghastly tones. 'He's eating us out of house and home.'

'Aye, he's goin' fast,' said Uncle Jobson, vindictively. 'The head's in fault, oh, aye—dodderin'. He'll no last the winter in my opeenion.'

'Can't get rid of him,' said Grandpa Piper. 'He *won't go*. Costs us pounds and pounds a week to keep him.'

Uncle Jobson noisily ate a boiled onion.

'I am distinguished by confidences from the family skeleton,' said Niven to Hetty.

'Well, if you won't do your duty and supply us with a reliable poison, not necessarily painless, you'll have

to put up with it,' said Hetty.

At the door Grandpa Piper waylaid Niven for a final confidence.

'Henry is a vampire—a vampire,' he said, clutching at phantom throats. 'He'll have your life's blood.'

'Dotty!' said Henry briefly to Niven in passing.

Niven escaped with relief to the drawing-room, where in a moment Ethel followed to snatch an embrace before Hetty's arrival.

'I am reprieved from despair,' said Niven at the release of a long kiss. 'Dinner was a perfect nightmare to-day.'

'You mean that old idiot.'

'No, no! with you a thousand miles away across the table. If I could have reached your foot I could have endured my isolation.'

'Oh, but we must be careful, you know,' said Ethel wisely.

On the whole they were very careful that afternoon, careful enough to address each other with a certain distinguished politeness, and, in Niven's case, to defer conversation to Hetty, though he certainly looked at Ethel most of the time. Still, there was a hitch somewhere in the gathering that threw it out of normal. Hetty at first put it down to Ethel's persistent presence on the sofa. She had gone out very rudely last Sunday while Niven was singing. Niven sang, but she did not go out. Rather, she listened in a dreaming reverie to those tenor interludes, which Hetty, catching a glimpse of, put down to affectation, since Ethel had no ear for music.

From that, Hetty discovered a variation in Niven. He sang with spirit, took with assurance notes that were usually slurred over, and when Mrs. Piper came

in for a brief interval he talked to her with animation.

Later, when the afternoon darkened, with a patter of rain against the window-panes, he announced that he must go; there was a case at the hospital which needed attention.

'I really must go,' he repeated, looking at Ethel and not going. Hetty glanced at them and bent down suddenly to tend the fire. 'A beastly evening,' said Niven, vacillating at the door. 'I wonder where I left my hat.'

'In the passage, isn't it?' said Ethel.

She went there to get it for him. There followed a brief interval in which, it seemed, they searched for the hat, for Niven's voice said brightly, 'Oh, yes, here it is,' and the front door closed behind him.

Ethel came slowly back to the fire-place, where Hetty still squatted, not tending it but staring blankly into the glowing coals. It was an effort for her to detach her eyes and turn their dark scrutiny on Ethel's untroubled face that stared also at the coals with placid detachment.

'I see you've got the gentleman,' said Hetty bitterly.

This piece of divination left Ethel at a loss for a policy to confute it. She only stared at Hetty.

'Oh, don't trouble to deny it,' said Hetty. 'It was written all over his face. Well, I wish him joy of his bargain, I'm sure.'

Her lips were twitching, but her eyes were fixed. In the imminent need of discharging self-disparagement somewhere she flopped over against the fender and railed it at Ethel.

'What an ingenious, subtle little cat we are, aren't we? How cleverly we manage these dear innocent imbeciles of men. Really, I'm almost sorry for the gentleman in the bicycle shop. Perhaps he doesn't mind

though. Is he complaisant or only in the dark? Is Niven going to be kept in the dark too? Quite an interesting situation. But of course we'll wriggle through it somehow, with a pretty air of ingenuousness. Pah! I never had much respect for the masculine intelligence, but I never thought Niven was quite such an idiot.'

Ethel suddenly found that she loathed Hetty. The emotion was sufficient for her; she did not trace it to its genesis in those thoughts that never reached her ears. 'Mock this creature with the tortured eyes,' they said, 'this weakling who posed as a dominant, this coward who funked her own desires and who casts the debt of defeated lust to your account. Life is clogged with these suffering incapables, who demand to suffer, who need to suffer; help them, then, to suffer.'

'Don't blame me because you are a fool with men,' said Ethel coolly. 'You had six months trying to get him.'

Hetty clawed at the fender, scrambling up with blazing eyes. Ethel gave the knife another twist.

'You told him about Arnold. You told him everything you could against me, and I can do just what I please with him.'

'Yes, you little beast, and so can any woman who gives everything away to a man, as you do.'

'And you give nothing and get it.'

The fatuous idiom of her generation rose in Hetty's throat and choked her. 'You—you—you' she cried—'You wait—wait till Niven finds——'

'Oh, he won't need to find out. You'll be there to tell him. Tell him, then. Tell him what you please. Tell him I had an affair with Teddie Briggs. I did, too, with you footling about after him in this ass of a room. He used to dodge you at the gate and come straight

round to meet me in the garden. Pooh,' she laughed. 'If you hadn't blundered into that dressing-room and caught Arnold you'd never have known a man existed.'

It was the idiom of her generation for Hetty, or strangulation.

'You filthy little strumpet!' she shouted.

'Hetty!!!'

Mrs. Piper stood in the doorway, aghast at unladylike expressions.

'So she is,' cried Hetty, turning furious black eyes on Mrs. Piper. 'She can put on her pussy-cat airs in front of you, but I know what she is. Look at her. She's——'

Ethel saw the impending exposure and darted to intercept it. The essential torturing of Hetty was quite another thing to inviting her mother's attention to the implements of torture.

'It's not my fault,' she exclaimed. 'I can't help Niven liking me. She—she's jealous. I told Niven she regards him as her property.'

Hetty's fury arrested justifications there by a stinging slap on the face.

'Listen to her,' she raged. 'She's been carrying on with that fellow Arnold and fooling Niven at the same time, and if there'd been twenty more she'd have had them all. That's the sort she is—a lying, sneaking, scalp-hunting little beast——'

'Hetty!. Hetty!! Hetty!!!' Mrs. Piper's optimism made demented efforts to defend her ears. She grasped at Hetty, but Hetty snatched her arm away and stood glaring and choking and working her fingers. The muscles of her throat ran up and down like quicksilver; her lungs repudiated air.

'She told Niven I wanted him—I——'

But humiliation had its bellyful. She blundered to the door, groped for the handle, found an open space before her and was hunted through it. They heard the crash of her bedroom door, the thump and clatter of her body hurled on the bed.

Mrs. Piper's stare of consternation turned to Ethel, holding her smitten cheek with sullen reserve.

'Ethel!' she said uneasily, 'what's the meaning of this?'

'Niven wants to marry me.'

Mrs. Piper sat down abruptly, relaxed in all her joints.

'Wants to marry you?' she repeated helplessly.

Ethel nodded, also helplessly. Exposure could only avert exposure.

'But I thought—I always understood—he and Hetty were so—there must be some mistake—some—really ——' said Mrs. Piper, recovering some appearance of indignation. 'He paid Hetty a great deal of attention. I do *not* think it quite nice of Dr. Niven to so suddenly change his mind.'

'Perhaps he didn't,' said Ethel darkly. 'You can't blame the man because Hetty chose to take charge of him.'

'But really!' said Mrs. Piper, and submitted afresh to a victimised optimism. She stared at Ethel curiously, estranged from a daughter who estranged the correct evasions of a daughter. A revealing intrusion of her forgotten youth hovered for admission, presenting all sorts of indecorous thoughts to be rejected.

'And when did Dr. Niven propose?' she asked mildly.

'A couple of days ago.'

Mrs. Piper went on staring at Ethel, and optimism undoubtedly soothed that regard. Here was a daughter

discovered full of secrecies, but here was a daughter comfortably disposed of. The name of Arnold recurred to her, but she smuggled it off the premises at once. She was warned against investigating a depreciative intrusion on the market values of marriage.

'Of course,' she said at length, 'I am pleased. Dr. Niven is a steady young man, and if he buys a practice in the town his prospects should be excellent. But you must remember', added Mrs. Piper impressively, 'that this is a serious disappointment to Hetty. She *may* have mistaken Dr. Niven's attentions, but I am sure I thought him extremely devoted myself. You must be careful to treat your sister kindly and say nothing to wound her feelings.'

'Yes, Mother,' said Ethel meekly.

Mrs. Piper rose, and after an unworthy impulse of embarrassment kissed Ethel on the cheek. And with an air of domestic benediction she saw her daughter off to bed, an air that decently smothered compunction after vacillating uneasily at Hetty's bedroom door.

In her own room Ethel presented to the mirror an extremely blank expression, upon which lingered the red imprint of Hetty's fingers.

'Curse that ass of a Hetty,' she thought, and was pursued by a picture of Arnold in his singed sweater, a lawless creature who had somehow got loose from the essential secrecies of love and who wished to drag her into the open too.

II

When Niven called the next evening Ethel was waiting to arrest him in the garden.

'I've told them,' she said. 'Hetty seemed to drop on the whole thing and I thought it would only lead to

another squabble, so—so I told them.'

'I'm glad you did—it was much the wisest thing to do.' He paused. 'Let me see—my cue is a solicitous interview with your mother, isn't it?'

'I suppose so,' said Ethel. 'Awful, isn't it?'

'Agonising!' said Niven, kissing her.

'No, but I mean all the gabble and the rest of it. You won't tell anyone about it, will you?'

'These scandals will out,' said Niven. 'Still, what does it matter? We can keep it a secret to ourselves.'

Ethel fidgeted in the garden while he went in search of her mother. Then she recollected that the garden was suspect and went into the drawing-room to pull down all the blinds. She had reason herself to suspect that something might now go on behind them.

Mrs. Piper's practised duplicity as a mother greatly simplified Niven's interview, but when he had returned to the drawing-room she found it a trifle ill at ease at Hetty's bedroom door.

'Hetty dear,' she said mildly, 'Dr. Niven has called.'

Hetty was doing her hair with elaborate precision before the mirror. She now turned on her mother a relentless eye.

'Now, look here, Mother,' she said. 'I won't have you looking at me as if I'd suffered a bereavement. I never really took Niven seriously, and I think he's very well disposed of on Ethel. If you'll tell me when the supper tray is ready I'll take it in to them.'

This was meeting maternal duplicity in handsome terms, as Mrs. Piper acknowledged, even if the admission overlooked a tendency to glare in Hetty's dark-rimmed eyes.

'My dear Hetty, I never doubted your good sense for a moment. You are quite right—quite right not to

consider Dr. Niven——'

At eleven Hetty carried coffee and sandwiches with an announcing jingle to the drawing-room. She was very much at ease, almost too care-free not to recall that there had been a re-shuffling in the official possession of its bric-à-brac. Possibly the presence of Niven and Ethel on the sofa reminded her of it.

'Congratulations!' she said frankly to Niven.

'Thanks,' said Niven with equal candour.

At the door Hetty was reminded of another trifle.

'Don't I owe you an apology—ōn Ethel's behalf?' she said to Niven. 'I was quite wrong about that little affair. I really wonder, now, how I ever came to make such a mistake about our Ethel's character.'

The sisters exchanged an unblinking stare, which Hetty detached with a bright nod to Niven and departed, to grit her teeth in the passage.

'Oh, you'll get to know Hetty in time,' said Ethel to Niven, with a little resigned shrug which told of knowledge long since depleted of its sting.

III

In the front room of his cottage, Arnold was working at a mass of papers when his wife brought him a cup of morning tea. He whistled absently as he jotted down figures, while she stood by looking sideways at this occupation with a certain round-eyed solemnity that temporarily suspended her dimples from operating.

'I suppose you know that Dr. Niven is engaged to that Piper girl,' she said suddenly.

'Which Piper girl?'

'Ethel.'

'Who told you that?'

'Mrs. Henry Piper.'

Arnold hurled down his pen with a hissing expulsion of breath. For a moment he glared round for something else to throw, but lacking a missile turned to glare at his wife. She gaped back at him with saucer eyes. Exposure was too complete for announcement to catch up with it. But that arrived at a bound.

'I knew it!' she exclaimed, and a world of transparent duplicities exploded on the spot.

'I've always known it,' she annotated, aghast at the amazing preciosity of her knowledge. Distended eyes could hardly encompass it or breath record it.

'You—only to think—and that girl—oh!!!'

She bumped suddenly into a chair with terrible erectness and implacably gripped elbows.

'You thought you had me nicely fooled, coming in at all hours and only out drinking with that Pincher, as if I hadn't watched you dodging across the Grammar School ground and their house just beyond and you sneaking across to see if I was asleep. Oh!!!'

She annotated exposure with another bump on the chair and an extra hitch of the elbows. Arnold looked at her with a scowl that overlooked her. Its attention was on a world of duplicities not so transparent as his.

'And that girl!—*that* girl—I always hated that girl. I must have known from the start—from the very moment it all began——'

Again, the evidence of superhuman prescience bumped her out of the chair and into it with an inflexible back and implacable elbows. The chair seemed to be doing it.

'That girl!!! The way she always looked at me, with that cool impertinence, as if I was dirt. She had your opinion for that—oh!!!'

At that bump she wept instantly and violently. There was no transition whatever from implacability to tears

and back to implacability again.

'That girl!!! The stuck-up little bitch—as if they didn't keep a draper's shop. The way she looked me up and down without a blink. I was standing at that very gate when she passed and Mrs. Henry Piper always dropping hints. "Your husband visits the Pipers, doesn't he? Oh, it's only Ethel he knows, then." Only this very morning she said, "Your husband will be quite pleased about the engagement, being such a friend of Ethel's——" I hate that woman. I hate you. A lot of use you've had for me these last three months—four times—four——!!'

Another miraculous transition exploded from tears to inexorable verticality in a breath.

'Not that I want you. Go and get it from that stuck-up thing of yours. You won't touch me again, treating me like this after sticking me in a rotten little house all day and never taking me anywhere—not even to Ballarat——'

Anguish turned the tear tap on and off at a twist. 'And not a word out of you sitting there like a stuck image. What have you got to say to me before I never speak to you again?'

'Shut up!' said Arnold morosely.

'Oh!!!'

That bump shot her out of the chair and out of the room and back into it in one exercise of stupefaction.

'You dare tell me to shut up—you dare—after the way you've—it's settled. I'll leave you. I'll catch the twelve-thirty this very day——'

Arnold intolerantly waved this tea-cup tempest off the earth; his own exasperations refused to focus under its din. His wife, who had reached the door, dashed back instantly.

'You want me to go. Oh! You've admitted it. You want to be rid of me. Yes—well, go yourself, then.'

He had leaped at his hat and gained the passage, speeded from behind.

'Go—go to that cat—tell her she can keep you——'

He went, banging the door crescendo. At the same instant his wife seemed to make the transit of the house and bang every door instantaneously.

Arnold went twenty paces at speed and pulled up with a stamp. He could not see Ethel at that hour and how gulp down the hours till night? Stamping his impatience on the gravel of an intolerable earth he made for the Royal Hotel.

IV

Ethel came out of the post office that afternoon with a premonition of Arnold's presence and met him on the steps. He had seen her from the hotel and crossed to intercept her, and his scowl was frankly illuminating.

'I want to see you,' he said truculently. 'Will you meet me at the lake at eight or will I come for you?'

'You needn't shout,' said Ethel. 'Yes, I'll meet you at the lake——'

She walked off, annoyed at his public defiance of their secret compact. Besides, Niven would be coming, and she wished to be with him, the new, the unexploited lover. But there was no trusting Jerry, especially now that he had obviously heard about Niven. It was best to see him and get it over.

She went out by the back way after tea, preparing retorts to prearranged accusations, and judging by Arnold's face as he met her these were simmering. He had been drinking all the afternoon, but he showed that only by his heavily contracted brows.

His greeting was a resentful push of the shoulder which directed her towards the upper path, but Ethel concluded that the lower park would do to talk in and arrested him.

'I can't stop long, Jerry,' she began.

Boiling-point was reached at once.

'You can't stop because you want to get back to that blighter Niven. You are going to marry him.'

'Rubbish!'

'What!!'

'I said rubbish.'

'D'you mean to say you are *not* going to marry him?'

'Who told you that story?'

'It's common property.'

Ethel gave a shrug, which disposed of accusation's good conscience on that score. Arnold peered into her face, his anger at a loss for its essential stimulus in combustion.

'Do you mean to tell me, honestly and squarely, that you are not going to marry Niven?' he demanded.

'I am not,' said Ethel calmly.

'Then how did that yarn get about. There must be something in it.'

'If you don't know what this place is for inventing gossip you ought to.'

He ruminated afresh, studying her face intently in the dim light. It was frankly composed, if that was the assurance he sought. It was also very lovely. With sudden resolution he took her arm and led her across the grass to a darker recess under the trees, and there, neatly picking her up, lowered her to the ground and himself with her.

'If that's the truth you're telling me about Niven the rest is easy,' he said. 'Listen to me and don't start pro-

testing. The insurance people have passed my claim and I've plenty of cash. That job in Sydney is fixed up and I've arranged to go across there next week and take it——'

'What! You are going to Sydney next week?'

'Yes.' He studied her briefly before adding, 'And you are coming with me.'

Ethel did not make the usual outcries of dissent at this statement. She remained reflecting over it, as something now seen within the area of possibilities.

'Of course, that's ridiculous,' she said at length.

'What is?'

'Expecting me to go off with the town band playing us to the station. If I *did* go I certainly would not go with you.'

'Do you mean that if I go first you'll come across and join me?'

'Oh, something of that sort. You could write and let me know when you were settled and then I dare say I could make a visit to Melbourne the excuse for joining you.'

'Do you really mean that?'

'Of course.'

Again he minutely studied this assurance in the dark, without, it seemed, deriving therefrom the blessed conviction of faith.

'No, I'm damned if I will,' he said. 'You'll go with me. Then I'll know I've got you.'

'Oh, you are absurd,' said Ethel impatiently. 'I won't talk about it. Let me get up.'

He held her down.

'Absurd—you call it absurd!' The masculine ego, always tremblingly aware of 'sacrifice' to the beloved, rose in panoply at that word. 'Haven't I worked to this

end for months past? Haven't I jacked up my business and my home for you? I offer you everything I've got; what more can a man do? What more do you expect from life if you throw down a love like mine?'

Ethel remained silent, and he shook her roughly in his arms.

'What are you really baulking at? Is it money? You needn't fear about that. I can make money. I mean to make it now to spend on you.'

She made a contemptuous sound. Woman's terror of the coin had no place in her vision of life.

'You say it isn't another man. Then is it that you've gone cold on me? Answer me. Don't you love me?'

'Of course I do. What's that got to do with it?'

The question astounded him. It explained and confused every conception of her in a breath.

'Hell! It's everything; it's the only reason we've got for being alive. You must love me; you do. I can feel it every time I kiss you. Then what in the name of thunder makes you—— Look here, you boggle at a silly trifle like making a railway trip with me, and you don't really boggle at taking love from me under conditions like this, where you have to tell a lie every ten minutes and be found out every time. You are ready to give everything to love and nothing to a lover. You can't do it. You must give an equal return for what you get. You want love; isn't mine as good as another man's? You must have a man—why shouldn't it be me?'

He had arrived at a question which Ethel, perhaps, would have liked an answer to herself. For a moment she was confused. After all, why not this lover before other lovers? He was handsome and desirable; wherever he touched her body it responded. Yet she was impelled to resist giving more than her body to him. 'He

wants too much,' she thought. But other thoughts, that did not reach her, knew better. 'He gives too much', they said, 'turmoil and violence, and love dogged with dominant gestures and outcries to the spirit.' Her hedonism knew better; love was the body, eternity encompassed in its power to record delight.

'I love you,' she said simply. 'I've told you that, but——' and suddenly she added, to herself, 'I'll do what I please with my own life.'

That trite phrase came to her with surprise, as if it illuminated all the uncertainties of her being. Perhaps it did. It clarified for her the understanding that she was surrounded by people who demanded that she should live by the prescription of their desires and not her own. Equality in love was not an equal exchange of love, but an equal power to extort pain. Arnold could arouse desire in her but he could not force her to suffer. That she translated to herself by a sudden feeling of security. As her ego rose strongly his was depressed.

'You love me,' he said bitterly, 'yes, as long as you can feel my belly against yours.'

A conviction of helplessness fell straightway to its only resource of fury.

'You slack-backed little bitch,' he cried. 'I know what's behind it all; the itch to have a dozen men tailing after you. You'll let me be one of them and that's my share of the business. Damn you! Blast you! I can hang on here and take my chance of a scramble in the dark with the rest and then get pushed out of the road again.'

It was true, of course, and that made Ethel angry.

'Go on,' she said, 'say a few more pleasant things.'

He said them, the vituperations of hate that rush so easily to a tongue trained to the idiom of love. She was

a liar and a wriggler—she withheld exposures from our need to excoriate them; she was salacious and incontinent, damnable attributes rendered divine only by our concurrence; she gave us perfect love, and its abhorrent pretence to others.

'You care for nothing on this damned earth but your own hide,' he chanted. 'You take everything and give nothing in return; you'd see a man comfortably in hell as long as your legs were round another, you——'

Ethel listened scornfully. This was Hetty over again, this clamorous demand that she should cease to be herself in order that weaker egoisms might flourish. Hetty had done her a service, that foolish virgin who had exposed the Nemesis of those who abnegate their own desires in a world of terrified submission to the demands of others.

'I'm sick of all this foolery about love,' she thought, her conscious contribution to a knowledge of its deeper profundity in self.

'I don't know why the hell I put everything on you,' Arnold was saying. 'You're not worth it——'

'Well, that settles it,' said Ethel.

Aghast, he realised that his anger left her untouched. An appalling thought intruded; he was going to lose her. It seemed to him that such a possibility arrived like something incredible and unforeseen, and it brought his egotism down in ruins.

'I can't give you up,' he cried. 'I can't live without you. You must come away with me; you must——'

Ethel grimaced uneasily in the dark. It was a cry of suffering and she hated that. Her intuition shrank from the indecent outcries of self-pity. But he began to search her face with his lips, ravished by its fragrance. 'I love you—I could eat you,' he kept repeating in the

stifled vernacular of sounds, which strove in vain to echo the eloquence of kisses that said delicious things to her eyelids, her nostrils, her open mouth, and to every curve of tender flesh that led them to her breasts.

All impulses to resist him vanished with Ethel's relaxing muscles. Now he was charming; now he was sincere. She put her hands to his face, rewarding it with caresses. Instantly, he was assured in his *métier* of lover; she loved him, there was not a doubt of it.

'You will come away with me?' he whispered against her ear, 'Promise—promise——'

'Oh, don't bother about that now,' murmured Ethel, distrait on a charming preoccupation.

Instantly his *métier* turned to hate. Her admission was flagrant; she cared nothing for him, only for his instrumentality to her desires. Humiliation choked all releases of emotion but one; the hand that caressed her throat submitted to a sensual loathing of its tender flesh.

'I'll kill you,' he said viciously, and perhaps meant to. Ethel gasped, choked, and thrust him off.

'You beast!' she cried, 'you hurt me; you meant to hurt me.'

He leaped up, thrusting her aside with his knee.

'Hurt you!' he cried. 'The only feeling you've got is in your skin. To hell with you! I'll never touch you again. Marry your tailor's dummy! Take the town to bed with you! I've done with you!'

He snatched himself away from her, snapping a gigantic resistance to throw himself at her feet. The stamp of his footsteps was recorded suddenly on the asphalt path and receded rapidly. He was gone.

Ethel sat up, bewildered, listening. He really was gone. Her senses refused to credit it; he must return, to them at least. But her ears detected nothing. In

alarm she scrambled up and reached the asphalt path. Far ahead she saw his figure against the lighted gateway, an angry silhouette, suddenly illuminated, then lost in the darkness beyond.

She hurried fast to catch him at the bridge, her mind extemporising terms of reconciliation. She had only to touch him again, she knew, to dissipate the foolish violence of words and dissipate, too, an intolerable image, a gesture of rejection from a lover. But that suddenly forced the threat of such another gesture on her mind and she stopped abruptly. Niven! She had forgotten him. In a flash the whole tide of intention swerved from one lover to the other, but its emotion did not swerve. She hasted now, but to avoid Arnold and to reach home by the back way that led upwards from the flats.

Niven was standing at the front gate, staring with depression towards the town, and did not see her till she was at his elbow. His start of alarm admitted the thoughts she had arrived on, and both remained for an interval staring at an uneasiness reflected by the street lamp.

'Why, Ethel, where on earth——' he began, but Ethel, to her own disgust, burst into tears and flopped against him to hide her face.

'But—Ethel, Ethel——' he kept repeating, his alarm now manifest and assured.

Her tears ceased abruptly but she kept her face averted. He felt a long shiver run from her breast to knees, and then she was pacified and controlled again.

'I think I'm mad,' she said, and raised her eyes to look at him.

There was only one madness on Niven's horizon and this outburst seemed horribly to announce it.

'Tell me, Ethel,' he said nervously, 'what is troubling you?'

Ethel knew very well what was troubling him, and realised that this was the place and time to stress its emotional value. Besides, no lover should be altogether deprived of his meed of a little jealous torture.

'I went to meet you at the hospital,' she said. 'I went by the lake road, and I suppose that's how I missed you.' She paused. 'And coming back I met Arnold.'

She paused again, letting Niven brace himself for the agony of an impending confession.

'Of course, it's quite true, he did run after me at one time,' she went on meditatively. 'And Hetty *did* catch him trying to kiss me in the dressing-room. But meeting him to-night, though I only had half a dozen words with him, made me think—and——' She made a little depressed gesture, 'What's the good? We had much better part. I hate suspicions and uncertainty—We'd much better break it off.'

With the thumb-screw adjusted, Niven felt that there was no waiting for the wrench to be applied. He implored her with his eyes to do that dreadful thing.

'But, Ethel, tell me truly. What was there—how far did—were you and he really——?'

Ethel stared, unable to apply these disjointed utterances. Then, with a shock, she divined an incredible suspicion.

'Oh—you don't really think—No, good Heavens! I suppose I was interested in him, in a vague sort of way, but beyond his trying to kiss me—it's not *that*, it's the absurd mountain of suspicion that Hetty has raised about it. You would always *think* there was something in it.'

She paused, to study Niven's face, or, rather, to let

him study hers.

'If there had been do you think you and I could ever have come together like this?' she asked simply.

This confession of the faith that *might* have been Arnold's came divinely to restore Niven's own.

'My darling!' he cried, 'banish that foolery for ever. Do you know', he added with the religious fervour of his lips on hers, 'that if I *had* taken you from the arms of another lover it would not have mattered, as long as I took you.'

He was quite sure of that. So was Ethel. All the delayed responses of the night rose to adorn this lover with ineffable charm. Niven's happiness, released from eminent despairs, rushed to meet the mysterious tide of desire that flowed from her body to his own, fusing them both in an amalgam of spirit which imperatively demanded its completed gesture in the flesh. That was confessed and confirmed by the impulse that drew them suddenly away from the gate and into the dark garden. Its shadows interlaced with their figures, which moved in a continuous embrace. At the far end of the garden that happy mass of honeysuckle waited; an arbour of vanishment. There shadows and figures became one.

CHAPTER XVII

I

ROBERT's diary for that month recorded a sound of consternation. It was cryptic, but emphatic: 'Millie two weeks late. Hell!'

For two weeks Robert and Millie met under the exclamatory terms of this announcement.

'Any luck?'

'No luck.'

'Hell!'

Of the two Robert was the creature of desperation and alarm. Millie was depressed, but she still admitted the disaster as something within the area of events to be suspected. Robert refused to accept it on any terms; it was an irrationality, a monstrous perversion of justice and reason that a necessary and delightful love affair should be turned suddenly into a trap to catch him as a generator of the species. Insensate as might be the malice of destiny, it had clearly overstepped the bounds of toleration in this case.

'It *must* come right,' he insisted.

'But what if it doesn't?' insisted Millie.

That was not to be contemplated; Robert made agitated sounds of renunciation whenever it was advanced. He seemed to think that to discuss it was to encourage destiny in its perversions of justice and reason.

'My sister got caught, and that's why her boy had to marry her,' said Millie firmly.

Robert almost preferred to discuss a perversion of possibilities to a solution of them on those terms.

'No use getting rattled,' he said. 'We'll fix it—we'll have to.'

With that imperative in view he sought out the chemist's assistant and held dark conclave with him. This lad, who was either a mediævalist or a scoundrel of the lowest order, advised an infusion of gin, bitter aloes, and Epsom salts. Robert carried this noxious compound to Millie behind the vestry, where it was gulped down by the brave girl with outcries of agony and bitter writhings, supported by a passionately solicitous Robert. She was making dolorous complaints an hour later and trying to spit out an abhorrent flavour apparently attached to her tongue for life.

But even this fell nostrum failed to work, however destructive as a corrosive to the palate. A box of pills, advised by the same alchemist to be partaken of with gin, gave Millie fearful stomach aches but no deliverance. Gin, figuring so largely in these antidotal specifics to maternity, certainly sent Millie home at times with a fine gesture of recklessness. Instead of enduring the Rev. Kneebone's ranting for one occasion she said, 'Pooh to you!' and went off with a flourish to her bedroom. There, it was by an inadvertence of balance and not rebellion, that she pulled the washstand over on top of herself, an almighty crash which did not discompose her in the least.

Even Robert's desperation began to falter under these repeated failures to bring destiny to its senses. Other resources were canvassed only to insist that hope was not yet dead.

'There are places where you can get fixed up, you know,' said Robert.

'Yes, and how am I to get away to them?' said Millie. 'They make you stay in those places a fortnight. And

then there is the money. I know a girl who went to one in East Melbourne and it cost her boy thirty pounds.'

Robert groaned. 'Couldn't you tell your mother?'

'*Her!*' said Millie, which ruled out a resource oblivious to all save gin. 'And *Him*,' she added, which meant the Rev. Kneebone. 'You can guess what he'll do when he finds out. I hate giving him the chance to get even with me. Well, let him kick me out. It will be the end of his shoutings and shakings, anyway. I hate the way he grabs hold of me. I hate his hands——'

She frowned at an emotion evasive and distasteful.

'He's always sneaking about the house at night, listening. You'd wonder what he was listening for. I woke up one night last week, feeling there was a light somewhere, and there he was with a candle, glaring at me, and there was me with the clothes kicked off, and my nightgown anyhow. "Cover yourself up, you shameless girl," he shouted and ran out of the room. And you know,' she added, 'he and mother never sleep together; haven't for years. He hasn't spoken to her for seven years. You wouldn't believe that, would you? Never a word. It makes her mad sometimes, and she tries to get up a row with him, but he never answers; just sits and looks at her. Takes it out of her that way. I don't wonder she boozes. Let him kick me out. I don't care. I suppose I can earn a living dressmaking, unless I drown myself.'

She spoke as if a solution to maternity between drowning and dressmaking was one quite removed from an emotional selection. Robert, to detach a personal implication from either solution, could only bluster at destiny, 'Damn it, it *must* come right.'

But in darker privacies destiny refused to be shouted down. The conviction of a potential malignant, ruth-

lessly dogging his being, forced him out of his bedroom chair betimes to aim furious blows at nothing. It slunk with him down the dark end of the passage and hunted him back into the light. It lurked for him in the pantry entrance with a long white beard—no, that was Grandpa Piper, shuffling something into a paper bag and quavering, 'No occasion for alarm, merely starving; merely starving——'

Destiny, in short, made such an intolerable nuisance of itself that there was no bearing its persecutions in private, and that was why Mr. Bandparts was invited to share its company. The three of them were seated in the little parlour, though Mr. Bandparts assumed the grouping a normal one of pupil and preceptor only. In that character he remarked to Robert, 'Your definition of the germination of Dicotyledons is all to blazes. Testa, albumen, embryo—please go through that section again.' In the character of Mr. Bandparts he added: 'Botany!—a resource for prurient old gentlemen with microscopes. Observe with what lustful glee they expose the sexual secrets of a cabbage—observe their frenzied outcries when the microscope is directed at their own!'

In the character of pupil, Robert jotted a memorandum on his notes. In the character of Robert, he glanced furtively at Mr. Bandparts.

'I say, J.B.,' he said at last, 'you know Millie——'

Mr. Bandparts glanced archly at him and went on smoking.

'The fact is, she's——'

'Yes, yes!' said Mr. Bandparts, 'that's understood. We discussed it as a matter of course some time ago.'

'But what the hell am I to do?'

'Action in these affairs is ritualised. You may marry

the girl, or not marry her. You may have her aborted, or you may let her have what is technically called a bastard. Or you may clear out.'

'I'll clear out,' said Robert.

'H'm,' said Mr. Bandparts. 'You accept the logic of funk. Possibly you are right. And what does the girl do?'

Robert made a negation of hope on that score.

'What she should do is obvious. But you have, of course, tried the usual remedies?'

'Everything!'

'Yes, the ingenious devils who invented the system calculated with a hearty laugh on the action of a common pill. Our only resource is now a little antiseptic surgery. But that, of course, comes expensive.'

Robert gloomed at a moneyless earth. Mr. Bandparts, after a period of reflection, tossed a mental triviality out of the window.

'At one time, Piper,' he said, 'I assumed a conscience problem in this matter of childbirth. That was due to a mistaken assumption that human life was a thing valuable in itself.' He blew a disdainful cloud of smoke. 'Pooh! Rough material for life and nothing more. But if this casual chemical product will dictate the ritual of its arrival at human form, let it take the consequences. It has invented marriage as a system to ensure the safety of that arrival. Very well, force it to stick to its damned system. In other words, blandly throttle it when it tries to arrive by a hole that it has officially labelled illegitimate. If it won't abolish marriage, it must take the retort of abortion. And as the embryo can't wave a flag to announce that it is an intellect, and not a human being, it must take its chance of being pushed back over the border with any other automatic human by-product.

It is obviously a worthy act,' added Mr. Bandparts, 'to frustrate some wriggling automaton, who, for all you know, may turn out a hodman, a millionaire, or even a newspaper editor. In your case the thing shows an almost imbecile indiscretion in selecting its point of arrival.'

'It's driving me mad,' said Robert. 'I wish I could get drunk.'

'That is a temporary solution to even worse evils,' admitted Mr. Bandparts. 'Not, however, that I endorse it under our strictly formal relationship.'

He got up, looked about, and sat down again. Since achieving his official intimacy with the barmaid at the Royal Hotel he had abolished the domestic expedient of a jug. It invited an undesirable exercise in casuistry from his little old mother.

'What about taking a stroll as far as Hennessy's Pub on the Long Point Road,' suggested Robert.

Mr. Bandparts stood up with a peremptory air.

'I have observed, Piper,' he said, 'a tendency in you to connect perfectly irrelevant attributes with the rationale of preceptor and pupil. We will take a stroll along the Long Point Road. That is an exercise strictly within the limits of our formal agreement. That Hennessy's Pub happens to lie in that direction is an isolated and unrelated fact having no significance to the act of strolling. Here', he added, lowering his voice, 'is my hat. Economy of space suggests that it will look less apparent under your coat than mine.'

Thus he was able to issue forth, frankly hatless, to see Robert off the premises. But his mother, who lurked with obvious malice to detect duplicities of appearance, now announced one.

'John!' piped the old lady, 'don't you go leading

young Mr. Piper astray with your drinking habits.'

'Tut-tut!' said Mr. Bandparts bustling Robert in a frenzy through the gate. But he gave Seneca a sharp rap in passing. 'Take that, you old fool,' he said, and gained the self-respect of military erectness again.

Casuistry was not unduly stressed to find an isolated factor like Hennessy's pub intruded on the exercise of strolling. If a preceptor lurked into its parlour it was doubtless by a purely automatic effect of muscular reflex action that a pupil's legs followed him. Besides, Hennessy was there to investigate the intrusion of casuistry by passing a succession of pots through a small porthole into the parlour.

A peculiar effect of these ministrations by Hennessy was that while Robert began to discover scorn for destiny's dirty trick of turning him into a parent, Mr. Bandparts abated his Olympian disdain for the process of such a metamorphosis by counselling a policy to defeat it.

'What do I care?' said Robert. 'Let her have her bloody little bastard.'

'Don't be a pot-valiant imbecile,' boomed his preceptor. 'You have an obvious last resource. Tell the wench to explode it on her parents. Then they'll have to do one thing or the other—countenance its arrival or help her to get rid of it. If she funks telling them, get somebody else to do it——'

'Yes, and who the blazes would?'

'Ha—hum!' said Mr. Bandparts, and peremptorily rapped for Hennessy.

II

Mr. Bandparts arrived at the parsonage twirling his moustache, humming a tune, and intonating 'Ha—

hum!' at intervals in a breezy inconsequential manner. This indicated that he called in passing on a trifling matter of affairs. In reality he was there in the character of a last resource on Robert's account, though he passed off anything weakly humanistic in the presentation by accounting it a mere pose of vulgar rationalism.

The door was opened by Millie. She had flour on her arms and a flush of cooking on her face, and Mr. Bandparts, who had begun by saying 'Ha!' loudly, said 'hum' quite meekly.

'Is your father in?' he inquired.

'I'll tell him,' said Millie, and ushered Mr. Bandparts into the study. There, being alone, Mr. Bandparts smote his brow. A policy of explosion lost some assurance of rationality when its subject was a nice little girl with a flushed face and floury bare arms.

But the parson's appearance restored a rationale in vulgar practicality, so much so that Mr. Bandparts found himself at a loss for terms sufficiently unintelligent to be effective. He cleared his throat several times with the effect of decisively announcing speech, stood up, and sat down again. The parson, who had got to his seat at the table, automatically followed these motions. He was clearly at some ill ease to account for a visitor so baritonally out of key with a Wesleyan vision of life.

'I have called', said Mr. Bandparts suddenly, 'on a trifling matter of—shall we say, obstetrics and domestic politics——?'

He stuck at that for a moment.

'At the outset let me say that the affair is no personal concern of mine. My intrusion on it is purely impertinent and possibly ill-advised. I appear in the character of a cheap impersonation of Destiny—I succumb to

a noxious impulse to meddle. My excuse is that I announce an inevitability in the hopes of partially averting it.'

This peroration seemed to be getting him further from its theme. A glance at the parson's suspiciously watchful eye decided him to adventure boldly in the simple terms of one honest man to another.

'Look here, Kneebone, the matter is simply this. A boy and girl of this town have got themselves into the usual muddle. That is, the girl is in the family way. Marriage is out of the question; the boy is not of age and has no prospects. As a man of the world' (that was bravely said, as one man to a parson) 'the obvious solution will present itself to you. The parents had better be informed. Their connivance is necessary. As they are parishioners of yours I assume it would be a simple matter for you to have a word with them about it. You have the excuse of temporal intrusion in these matters which I have not.'

Kneebone had been rasping his whiskers with a gradually glazing eye. He now said mechanically, 'Go on, sir.'

'Well, that's about all,' said Mr. Bandparts. 'A little tact from you to the parents, a little tact from them to the daughter, and a lot of unnecessary muddle is reduced to order. I do not, of course, assume you to entertain ethical prejudices in a matter that is purely social.'

Kneebone was not listening. He now recalled his vacant gaze to focus it on Mr. Bandparts.

'Tell me the names of these—this couple you speak of,' he said.

'Certainly. But I must first have your assurance that you will move benevolently in their interests.'

The parson's eyes narrowed, and then glared. His jaw opened and shut with a spasmodic movement. He rose, pointing a denunciatory finger.

Mr. Bandparts also rose. It was clear that a violent emotion had suddenly scattered the rationalities of address.

'This is my daughter you speak of,' exclaimed Kneebone.

'Nonsense—absurd!' blustered Mr. Bandparts, losing his cue at this direct announcement of it. The parson made violent and jerky gestures at him.

'My daughter! My daughter!' he shouted. 'Tell me the name of the fellow who has seduced my daughter.'

'But look here, Kneebone——'

'Tell me his name——'

'That's a triviality——'

'His name!'

'I tell you that's immaterial.'

'You refuse to give me his name. You shield him. His name, I say!'

'Oh, the devil!' said Mr. Bandparts impatiently. 'I won't tell you his name, that's flat. Suppose the girl is your daughter, are you going to treat her with a decent show of compunction?'

'How dare you dictate a course of action to me? My daughter is disgraced—ruined!'

'Rubbish! Your daughter is not ruined. It remains for you to ruin her, if you will stick to that obsolete formula. Come, be reasonable. You can't alter the situation by ranting at it. You've got to face it.'

The parson made a frantic gesture. 'Are you called on to face this disgrace?' he cried. 'I have done everything in my power to avert it. My daughter has wilfully gone her own road. She shall pay—pay. I'll have no

more of this——'

'Well, I'm damned!' said Mr. Bandparts. 'You are an invention of cheap fiction after all.'

It seemed that Mr. Bandparts had thrown up further pretence of the approach rational.

'Leave my house!' shouted Kneebone. 'You come here to exult over me in this disgrace. You are in league with the scoundrel who sent you. You conspire with him—you countenance and abet his obscene lusts——'

'Shut up! you non-existent spook of a defunct generation!' thundered Mr. Bandparts.

Kneebone shut up, without intending to. A sudden tic clicked his jaws rigid, and left him gesticulating at speech.

Mr. Bandparts formally put on his hat and tossed a now superfluous rationality out of the window.

'I have wasted words on you,' he said. 'I will now bestow them with a nice sense of their value. You are a moral imbecile. You are the product of a God who never had a sense of humour and who still thinks he invented the earth. You have crawled out of a pot-hole in space with the good conscience that you no longer eat raw meat. You are a saved savage. You are an inhibition in all the lusts you desire and dare not practise. You exist as the negative announcement of the thing that you are. By its exposure you are exhibited as the thing you are not. You are not even a human being. You are a Christian. Personally,' concluded Mr. Bandparts, pausing at the door to cast a satiated glance at the parson, 'I prefer you in the raw meat stage.'

He went. A baritone mutter disposed of 'Ha!—hum!' a conscious repudiation of conscience. No matter the affair was now exploded; something would have to be done about it. Nevertheless, he was glad to reach

the Royal Hotel, and peremptorily drink three long beers in succession. After that it was easier to stultify a suspicion that to interfere in the affairs of these human imbeciles was only to make a worse mess of them.

Since the arrival of Mr. Bandparts, Millie had continued making scones with a disturbed conviction that the employment interposed on an impending calamity. Mr. Bandparts was Robert's friend; now the uproar of voices from the study announced the imminence of drama on her account. Still, she went on methodically making scones.

Her mother sat by the table, reading a novel. Sometimes she took a sip of gin and water, or nibbled a biscuit, or indulged in a little monologue, without disturbing her capacity to read on all the while. She was in the comfortable stage of nipping, when to-day's supply of liquor had nicely mitigated the after-effects of yesterday's. All she required from life was any trifle of attention at which to project the pleasant assurance of narcotism. Her tone thereat was one of languid and amiable derision, which wandered where it pleased for subject matter.

'Coffee biscuits—always coffee biscuits. And they really don't taste of coffee. And why do grocers' shops always make one forget what one came for? I never could remember whether it was sardines or ginger nuts. And why do heroines always have auburn hair, not red, you know. That would never do. And it's always like burnished copper, and enhances the creamy texture of their skins. Dear me! A perfect parsonage stove, all draught and no heat. These parsonages get successively worse each time. This one is positively falling to pieces with dry rot. It must be the effect of sermons. What a vulgar noise, shouting at each other. Your dear

father must be arranging a charity bazaar——'

Millie heard the door bang on Mr. Bandparts departure, but her father did not come hasting to a final denunciation. Instead, she could hear him moving rapidly about the study, throwing down small objects in transit. A chair fell, then a book. Then there was silence, the assumption of anger ruthlessly controlled. That was announced at last by his slow arrival at the kitchen door, where he stood and looked steadily at his daughter. His face was expressionless, his jaw slack, his eyes dulled. Decision, drastic and final, had renounced emotion.

Millie went on rolling out dough. She understood very well what that suppressed pose in the doorway announced, and was surprised to find that it did not matter in the least. Her thoughts were eminently practical. He could hardly throw her out without a train fare to Melbourne, and she had three pounds of her own. For the present she had one firm preoccupation, and that was to stand no more shaking from him.

'I have something to say to you,' he said at last.

She gave him permission by a brief glance and went on with the scones.

'You will tell me', he said deliberately, 'the name of the fellow who has seduced you.'

Millie raised her eyebrows at the scones. They really were absurd lumps of dough, after all.

'You hear me.'

A toss of the shoulder.

'Answer me.'

Not even a toss of the shoulder. But she was watchful—at the scones. You never know when these things are going to explode.

Kneebone found it necessary to reassert his pose of

cold deliberation. It mastered an urgency that was passionate and insistent. Beyond all surface admissions, his obsession demanded to know by crude confession that this girl had been embraced, as if the driving rage of licentious imagery could only become credible in the hated personality of her lover. He must have it, that self-substituted image of lust.

'You understand me,' he said. 'I am not trifling. You tell me who this fellow is or leave my house to-night.'

The dough, neatly rolled, was cut in slices. Millie banged open the oven door and put in a hand to test its heat. Out of bland abstraction Mrs. Kneebone contributed a passing comment, 'They'll never rise in that oven,' and took a sip of gin.

Kneebone shut his teeth on a conviction of impotence. A trivial earth was leagued to defraud him of the one release in all its monstrous angers and suppressions.

'You *will* tell me,' he said.

At the same time it was perfectly conveyed that she would not, and his febrile struggle for control lapsed and released his hand automatically to clutch at her.

He was thrust off with a surprising effect of contemptuous vigour. That soft body, so submissive to rough handling, concealed disdainful muscles much stronger than his own. He lost his head in the humiliating discovery that no woman is ravished without her own consent, and continued a fruitless and absurd struggle, repeating breathlessly, 'You will—you will—you will!'

Mrs. Kneebone discovered a disturbance somewhere on the essential calm of gin and novels and said, 'Oh, indeed' several times, in a tone of bored, but polite, protest. No concession made to that, she picked up the

rolling-pin and lunged to desire attention. The weapon, with some weight behind it, took her husband on that part of the backbone least protected by fatty tissue and jerked a sound of frenzy from him. Perhaps he was glad of any excuse for simpler terms of rage, and turned them on his wife.

'Look at this girl, you!' he shouted. 'Look at her! Your daughter. A prostitute——'

'Oh, indeed,' said Mrs. Kneebone. 'How very impolite. And from a parson too. Shocking!'

'This girl', he said, hammering the words at her, 'is with child. Do you understand that? In spite of everything I have done to save her this disgrace she has wilfully gone her own way to it. There is no excuse. She leaves my house to-night.'

Mrs. Kneebone had been saying 'Oh, indeed' politely, but she now stiffened and stared at her husband. He was addressing her directly; the rancour of silent years had found a voice. Instantly her own lost its tolerance and was invigorated by spleen.

'Your house,' she cried. 'It is your house. And a bloody house it is. Only booze could make it fit to live in. How dare you speak to me, you sulky beast! You haven't spoken for seven years. Soak in your dirty temper for another seven.'

For a moment Kneebone gave his wife the concession of a glance of hate. Then he returned to his normal pose of sullen disavowal of her.

'I address you for one reason,' he said. 'This girl—your daughter, is with child——'

Mrs. Kneebone's eyes, at that, were forced to direct themselves uncertainly at Millie.

'Is this true, Millie?' she asked.

Millie nodded briefly. Mrs. Kneebone also nodded,

but with a certain malevolence at her husband.

'And so you are going to turn her out, are you?' she said.

'She was warned. She knows what to expect. She must go.'

'Quite so,' said Mrs. Kneebone, nodding. 'And I'll go too. And I'll see her through. And with your money——'

At his gesture of denial she snatched up the rolling-pin and flamed into violence.

'You dare speak to me,' she cried. 'You made silence your law and you'll keep it. You haven't spoken to me for seven years and you won't get the chance to again. I've only waited my opportunity to tell you that. And now I've the opportunity of getting out of the same house as you, I'll take that too—Pooh!——' She tossed down the rolling-pin and seated herself, nodding and shaking. 'I don't know why I waste breath to shout at you. Go to the devil, you sulky hound!'

Kneebone still looked at her but his gaze had become blank. Mental fatigue made it suddenly impossible to focus this threat of disruption to the routine of years. Something else had vanished from his emotional horizon, but that also eluded attention. His gaze, still vacant, rested for a moment on Millie, but he could call to mind nothing to be said there. Nothing to say anywhere. Nothing to do but walk, with twitching muscles, down the passage to the study, and there close the door against intrusion.

'Yes, go!' said Mrs. Kneebone, nodding after him. 'Go and practise a little silence on your own account.'

But Millie, with more urgent matters to think of, touched her mother's arm.

'Will you really, though, mother?' she asked.

'Will I what?'

'See that it's all right.'

'Of course. Isn't your Aunt Millie a trained nurse? She doesn't run that big house in St. Kilda on a nursing salary, either.'

Millie wished to embrace her mother and release a happy impulse, but did not. Mrs. Kneebone had reached for her gin and her novel and returned to a tolerable world. Millie went thoughtfully to the door, rubbing the flour from her bare arms. Those scones would never be made now, and that seemed an immense relief. And really, now that all the fuss was over, it did not much matter whether she had the kid or got rid of it.

'I suppose I'd better pack,' she said. 'We need not leave till to-morrow morning.'

'Do as you please, my dear.'

It pleased Millie to go and suspend a towel from her bedroom window before beginning lightheartedly to sort out clothes to be packed. It pleased her to think of the pleasure this good news would be to Robert. It pleased her to think of getting rid of the kid; it pleased her to think of not getting rid of it. Everything pleased her except some trifling regrets at leaving Robert. But they would have a good last evening together, and she was pleased at that, too.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

'All I can say, J.B.,' said Robert solemnly, 'if it hadn't been for you where in hell would I be?'

'Where you should be, of course, and that is suffering the frenzies of a threatened paternity. What are you here on earth for at all but to have a hell of a time of it. Haven't the dear gods invented it solely to that end. It happens that for once I am able to frustrate their endeavours on your behalf. But they'll get you yet—they'll get you.'

They were celebrating Robert's last day in Redheap, and for this solemn function the back parlour of Hennessy's pub on the Long Point Road had been selected.

It was a small dingy room, exuding a smell of beer, tobacco, and damp clothes. The beer and tobacco were Hennessy's contribution, but the damp clothes belonged to Robert and Mr. Bandparts. Hennessy's only concession to æsthetics were two prints of extinct racehorses and a portrait of Robert Emmett. Through a small porthole that looked into the bar there was visible a section of Hennessy's bald head, the contour of Hennessy's fat cheek, and a portion of Hennessy's long rank beard, such beards as flourish at the expense of sterile craniums.

Beyond these remnants of Hennessy could be seen a partly obliterated swagman dozing at the bar. Hennessy himself appeared to slumber, too, resigned to melancholy inaction.

The two customers in the parlour seemed to be his

sole guarantee of solvency, if the muzzy laxity of their appearance could be taken for a financial asset. The little table at which they sat was sticky with the imprint of successive pots. Mr. Bandparts, on a chair which creaked with the abandon of his pose, appeared to simulate an air of majestic gloom, the better to repudiate any assumption that he might be drunk. At intervals he was forced to shut one eye in order to get an exact bearing on his pupil's direction.

Robert's potations had brought him to that stage of youthful intoxication when friendship at all costs must be registered with religious fervour.

His utterance, it is true, a little retarded so holy an emotion, and he drooped across the table in an effort to focus the object of his admiration.

'That's allri', J.B.,' said he. 'Point is—you get mater lemme go University. There you are. I tell you, J.B., I desire go University more'n words can say.'

'I told your mother', said Mr. Bandparts, 'that to the best of my knowledge your talents were such as would ensure you an eminent scholastic success. It was a lie, conscientiously uttered, as a means of getting you out of the township. It's one excuse was that it succeeded. If there is one thing self-evident it is that you are destined to be an eminent scholastic failure.'

'Wha's matter?' said Robert airily. 'Point is—gets me outer stinkin' hole. Earns my gratitude. I 'sure you, J.B.——' The earnest nature of this communication forced him to punch Mr. Bandparts on the knee. 'I gotter 'mense admirashion for you.'

'Your admiration, Piper, is inspired by a frank solicitude for your own safety. That insures its sincerity.'

'So's Millie,' continued Robert. 'Saw her same night. Grace admirashion for you. First idea, bust up every-

thing. What's result? Old man want to kicker out. Old woman told him to go to hell. Took Millie off town *fixer up*. Not coming back, either. Splendid. Wrote me. Gotter address. See her meself, later. Never know. Strange place—mightn't get holder girl on the spot. Have one there waiting. Grand!'

'I am glad to see you are frankly sordid in the economics of fornication.'

'Exactly. I assure you, J.B. I love girls.'

'Well said. A profundity. The only one to be announced on earth.'

'Exactly. Funny thing about Millie's old woman, though. Regular old boozer an' all that. *Acts* abserlutely decent. How'd you 'count for it?'

'Simply. If she had been a good woman she would have kicked her daughter into the streets. I once called that admirable lady an old trollop. It was a shameful submission to mob psychology. I should have known that no woman is humanly decent till she's ceased to be respectable.'

'Exactly. Drink up and have another.'

'You have had too much already,' said Mr. Bandparts formally.

'Dockandorris,' remarked Robert, hammering at the table. Hennessy, aroused to an automatic ceremonial, passed two fresh tankards through the porthole, framing his sad fat face in the opening to see them safely deposited.

'Have one yourself, Dan,' said Robert royally.

'Thanks, Bob,' said Hennessy, with resignation.

He pulled himself a pint, filling the porthole with his beard in order to nod sideways at Robert.

'Here's success, Bob,' said he, with the air of one long since resigned to failure.

'Last y'll see o' me, Dan,' said Robert boastfully. 'Leavin' t'morrer, good an' all.'

'Are ye indeed, Bob?' said Hennessy, resigned even to this final deprivation.

'Goin' University, Dan,' said Robert.

He had a boozy sense of compunction for this fat, sad publican who was not going to the University. It was his fate to stay behind in a lonely pub on the Long Point Road and never go to the University at all.

Hennessy, strange to say, appeared submissive to his hopeless lot. He merely took his beard out of the port-hole in order to shake hands with Robert, as marking the formal nature of his departure.

It was past nine when they took the road, too fuddled to record the passage of time. A drizzling rain was falling and the wheel-ruts were puddles of water, but they lurched along arm-in-arm, with the lofty indifference of drunkards to the antics of their feet. Robert glowed inwardly with the intoxication of beer and happiness. He understood the divine rationality of Destiny; it waits to reward our dearest hopes and dreams.

'When I think o' gettin' outer blasted hole like this,' he said, 'I feel like goin' mad for pure bally joy.'

'Piper,' boomed his preceptor, 'if I could endow you with the calamity of my wisdom I would teach you to frustrate a system in frustration by expecting it to do its worst to you. That will at least rob it of the miserable satisfaction in doing it. You are sanguine, excitable, optimistic. You offer yourself bound and helpless to the malice of the gods. They will be always leading you somewhere in order to convince you that there is nowhere to go to. They will transport you to Timbuctoo so that you may find Timbuctoo a blasted hole and Hennessy's pub a tavern of dreams. And you would be

right. So it is. Reality exists not in a pub, but in the dream conception of a pub. Thus we posit the eternal contest between Desire and the effort to attain it. We never realise that the conception of desire is its realisation and the effort to achieve it by the gesture of action a mad fantasy. That gesture but announces to consciousness that by an image of desire desire has been achieved. Therefore we never achieve the realisation of desire, because we have achieved it. Oh, subtle and ruthless devils,' apostrophised Mr. Bandparts, shaking a fist aloft, 'I announce the perfect ingenuity of your system with an utter repudiation of you who condescend to use so base a thing. Piper, do you know why the gods are ruthless? Because they are happy. And they are never so happy as when they have earned our bitterest outcries of despair and self-contempt. That is the incense which feeds their altars—the signal by which they know they have conquered and driven us on our bellies into the mud of earth. Bah! Repudiate their insensate malice, Piper. Achieve the gesture of desire and let its image be damned. Get all the fun you can out of booze and women. Exalt the divinity of the present moment. Be happy and torture the gods with unhappiness because they cannot drive you to despair.'

'You're a beggar to talk, J.B.,' said Robert simply.

'That', said Mr. Bandparts, sending a final curse aloft, 'is because there is no one on earth to talk to.'

Thus they reached the Grammar School corner, their habitual point of separation. Here Mr. Bandparts, after several preliminary false starts, assumed the upright bearing of sobriety.

'Piper,' he said abruptly, 'good night.'

'Better shake hands,' remarked Robert. 'Won't see me again.'

'I am aware', said Mr. Bandparts, 'that you catch the nine o'clock train to-morrow morning. What has a trivial mechanism on wheels got to do with union or disunion of the spirit? One cannot lose a friend in eternal space; how the devil can a railway journey part one from him? And why shake hands across a few inches of space and time. Pooh! To hell with all gestures whereby the people announce largess of heart. To hell with the people! To hell with the gods! To hell with the earth! To hell with everything but the spirit of Satanism and laughter!'

Again achieving the upright posture with military rigor he said sternly, 'Piper, good night,' and stalked upon his way.

Robert stared after him vaguely. The transient melancholy of beer stirred him to reject this lack of sentiment in a dear friend.

'Might shake hands a man goin' University,' he said, detaching himself from the fence with a generous lurch that carried him into the gutter and, by a further succession of curves, to the gate of his home. Here he paused for some time in order to correct any slight laxity of deportment that might be observed in his bearing. To that end he combed his hair with his fingers and ate a clove. There was a light in the drawing-room and policy suggested that he should stroll in there, briefly exhibit his extreme sobriety, and retire honourably to bed. The intense clarity of his mind was somewhat defeated in this procedure by the conduct of his legs, which carried him into the room with a plunge. Niven and Ethel were seated on the sofa, and the drama of his entrance disconcerted them. But a glance at this

future brother-in-law reassured Niven, who nodded leniently at the intruder. Robert extended to them the benediction of a muzzy smile, designed to put them at their ease.

'Going Universiry,' he said.

'So I hear, Bob,' said Niven.

Robert found himself suddenly filled with a warm regard for Niven. If at any time his conduct had suggested that Niven was an intolerable snob he wished frankly to disavow that misconception.

'Shakeands,' he said.

That ceremony accomplished, he sat down suddenly on the music stand and laughed loudly.

'Never so 'stonish me life,' he said, in explanation of this hilarity. 'Could'n believe it. My idea—struck on Hetty. Marry Ethel. Absurd! Utter rot! Mine yer, Ethel's a'right. Ethel's favourite sister. Grace affexion Ethel.'

'You'd better go to bed, before mother sees you,' said Ethel coldly.

'Wass marrer? Perfec'ly right. Sober's judge.' Announcing complete responsibility of action he made an airy gesture of assurance and fell off the music stand, a pile of music descending on his head. This feat greatly stimulated his good humour and he laughed uproariously. Attracted by this crapulous mirth, Mrs. Piper came to the door and looked in.

'I thought I heard Robert's voice,' she said.

Robert made a strong effort to arise and present a dignified appearance. His body, unfortunately, refused to assist this intention. A pair of feet, partially obscured by sheets of music, confirmed Mrs. Piper's suspicion of a presence behind the music stand.

'What are you doing there, Robert?' she enquired.

'Bit of a lark,' said Robert feebly.

'I think you might have come home to tea,' said Mrs. Piper, 'seeing that it is your last evening at home. Really, I think it very unkind of you, Robert.'

'Had tea Bandparts,' remarked Robert.

Mrs. Piper stared at him doubtfully. His utterance was indistinct, his hair disordered, and what could be seen of his face suspiciously red. It was a fortunate thing for the integrity of Robert's last evening at home that Grandpa Piper chose that moment to create a diversion. The ancient did this most effectively by staggering into the room with his mouth agape and his countenance abandoned to an expression of extreme horror.

'Poisoned!' he ejaculated, clutching at the region of his stomach. Robert was completely forgotten in the drama of this announcement. The hubbub of alarm which followed brought Uncle Jobson hasting to the scene, followed by Hetty.

'Explain yourself, Grandfather,' cried Mrs. Piper.

'Poison—black bottle,' gasped Grandpa Piper, bending and clutching Niven seized the ancient and began to examine him.

'What poison could he have got?' he asked.

'I can't understand—there's no poison in the house,' said Mrs. Piper.

'Ye happen to be wrong,' announced Uncle Jobson triumphantly. 'It's my opeenion he's been at the Paris Green I have for the hen roosts.'

'Arsenic!' exclaimed Niven. 'We must give him an emetic, quick!'

With Mrs. Piper's help he lugged the ancient from the room, followed exultantly by Uncle Jobson. This event had passed too swiftly for the majestic aloofness of Robert's comprehension. He got to his feet now, after

several ungainly plunges and stared at Ethel.

'W'a's marrer?' he asked.

'He's taken poison, or something,' said Ethel.

It was an undoubted fact that this announcement failed to disturb Robert's equanimity.

'Utter rot!' he remarked, and observing Hetty in the doorway insisted at once on shaking hands with her.

'Going Universilly,' said he.

'Oh, go to bed, my child,' said Hetty irritably.

With a mutual aversion she and Ethel turned aside from each other. All expression of animosity had passed between them, but its physical aspect remained, for neither could meet the other's eyes. Standing between them, Robert had one of those moments of illumination that attend the intellectual clarity of liquor. He probed the emotions of these sisters in the light of his own inspired future. All the desirable things in life lay before him—friendship, beer, tobacco, girls, literary ideals, his own latch-key; in short, a free citizenship of the life intellectual and mundane—while they were committed to the daily round of dusting, sweeping, meal-getting, and squabbling, condemned to wait always upon the monotony of Sunday, to know no other mitigation of boredom but novels, tennis, and visitors in the drawing-room; in short, the martyrdom of Home.

At least he would see hatred expelled from so sad a lot. With a gesture great, benevolent and comprehending he addressed them.

'Wa's sense you two silly devils fightin' over Niven?'

So impersonal a request for tolerance had its effect on Hetty and Ethel, for it forced their eyes to meet suddenly, in an inscrutable glance, armed against any admission of weakness. It was Ethel who turned aside first, to examine her calm, untroubled face in the mirror.

Hetty went on staring, and her lips twitched as if she tasted the desire for a healing venom.

'Fight'n like cats!' said the peacemaker. 'Shake hands!'

'You are making a mistake, my child,' said Hetty sweetly. 'I am charmed at the prospect of our Ethel's marriage. Mrs. Niven. Fancy! What an interesting experiment. Domestic peace, and housekeeping, and all the rest of it. Mrs. Niven at home to visitors. Our Ethel among the matrons. Twenty-four hours a day of wedded bliss. Husband and wife and years and years of a happy hum-drum existence. How it simplifies things, too. No more suspicions, no more jealousy, no third person, of course. Perfect faith, trust and affection. How easily it settles our Ethel's problem, doesn't it?'

Ethel's face in the mirror reflected no concern at all for these complexities so apparent to simple Hetty. They were already settled, for that matter, since she and Niven were lovers. And there would be always fresh lovers for that graceful little head, blonde and tranquil, with the lowered eyelids ready to open and reveal eyes that could tell any story of desire they pleased. With such assets one had destiny at the mercy of kisses; when their charms failed at last let destiny think it had won; life would have been lived, and ended.

These exchanges of the spirit escaped Robert, who nodded approvingly at Hetty.

'There you are,' he said, 'sensible. Shake hands, Ethel.'

'Quite so,' said Hetty coolly. 'And I think, under the circumstances, you'd better go to bed. It will only upset mother if she sees you in that absurd condition.'

Robert had a relapse into laxity. He found it too much trouble to bestow the virtue of tolerance on these

sisters. Besides, a protective sense urged him to slink suddenly into the passage to avoid the return of Niven, fresh from the drenching of Grandpa Piper.

'Kerosene,' he heard Niven say. 'Don't know what induced him to take it, I'm sure.'

'Reckless old person,' said Hetty.

'It won't do him any harm, of course,' said Niven.

'That's rather a pity,' said Hetty, moving to the door. Conversation between these two was maintained by a guarded cordiality, from which Ethel remained aloof. In their presence together she had the air of a polite but disinterested stranger.

Mrs. Piper, followed by Uncle Jobson, came to the door, and Hetty went out.

'We've put him to bed,' said Mrs. Piper. 'I suppose he'll be all right now.'

'Quite all right,' said Niven. 'He's had a bit of a fright, nothing more.'

'I do hope it will be a lesson to him,' said Mrs. Piper.

'It'll be a lesson to ye to keep yon cubboard locked,' said Uncle Jobson resentfully. The Paris green had not fulfilled its mission.

The truth had been extracted from Grandpa Piper, whose powers of resistance had quite failed at the attack of mustard and water. The secret of his guilty terrors was further exposed by a visit to the pantry. He had been guzzling quietly in the dark, it seemed, picking here and there among the dishes. At night all cats are grey, and the ancient had taken a pull at a bottle of kerosene in a moment of generous optimism.

'Oh eh!' said Uncle Jobson, not to be robbed of a reward in spleen. 'Yon dodderer's had a verra useful lesson. Man, he has the fear o' Goad on him this minute. He'll no forget the grand dose o' mustard and

watter we give him, in my opeenion.'

Robert reached his bedroom stealthily, shutting the door upon these trifles of a domestic world that he was leaving to-morrow. His box stood ready for the morning cab, packed and directed. His pocket edition of 'Don Juan' he had left out for reading on the journey. A travelling bag lay on the bed, half full of the smaller articles of adornment, though a final space was reserved for his pipes, notebooks, and certain personal items too sacred for other hands to pack.

He stood for some time, in a muzzy state of contentment, surveying this room which to-morrow would become the mausoleum of his youth. Every object it contained marked some period of his growth, and he abandoned it with frank delight.

Already, in the brilliant prospect of his future it had become remote, tolerable only as the scene of his last night at home.

His present business was wholly practical and concerned the contents of his desk, the records, indeed, of those hidden spaces in Mrs. Piper's vision of Robert's existence. It would never do to leave this hostage of reputation to a chance discovery, and short of taking it with him there was nothing for some of its contents but the flames.

With a brisk air, he emptied the litter on his table and commenced to go through it. The letters of his Fidus Achates and the copies of his answers thereto were put aside for the travelling bag, as things dedicated to the biography of genius. Letters from less important friends he lit at a candle and dropped into the washbasin to burn. Stray notes from girls received this penalty, too. A book of Paris Salon nudes, harmless things, but kept piously for their supposed charm of

licentiousness, being too bulky to burn he stuffed away behind the bookcase. His diary puzzled him for some time, and he vacillated over a half-formed intention of destroying it too. Why keep this record of puerilities when the real business of life was about to commence? It fell open at his last entry, dated a couple of weeks back, but already musty with a flavour of age.

'Felt damn miserable, as J.B. is uncertain as regards the mater letting me go to the University. Find I am unable to read, owing to uncertainty. Even George Gilfillan fails to hold me. Feel suicidal, and could get tight with avidity, had I the necessary coin. George tells me his old man has got him a job on the railway. He leaves home this month. Thus all the old friends go.'

So dismal was the future of two weeks ago. Now its happiness was so assured that even his Muse was not called upon to record it. He had forgotten that dismal lady in the promise of a brisk affair with Madame Life.

The diary, in the end, was not destroyed. Even these trivialities—who knew?—might one day become portentous as the records of a Great Man's youth.

Thrusting the candle under the bed, he dug at the skirting board with his knife, removing a section that had been sawn through. A small dark hole was disclosed, let into the wall. He had made this receptacle for secrets long ago, and now remembered it in time to save the diary's life.

So there was entombed the record of adolescence, to consort with rats and spiders while its author, too happy to sleep, sketched a record for maturity in the grand gesture by which it would be lived.

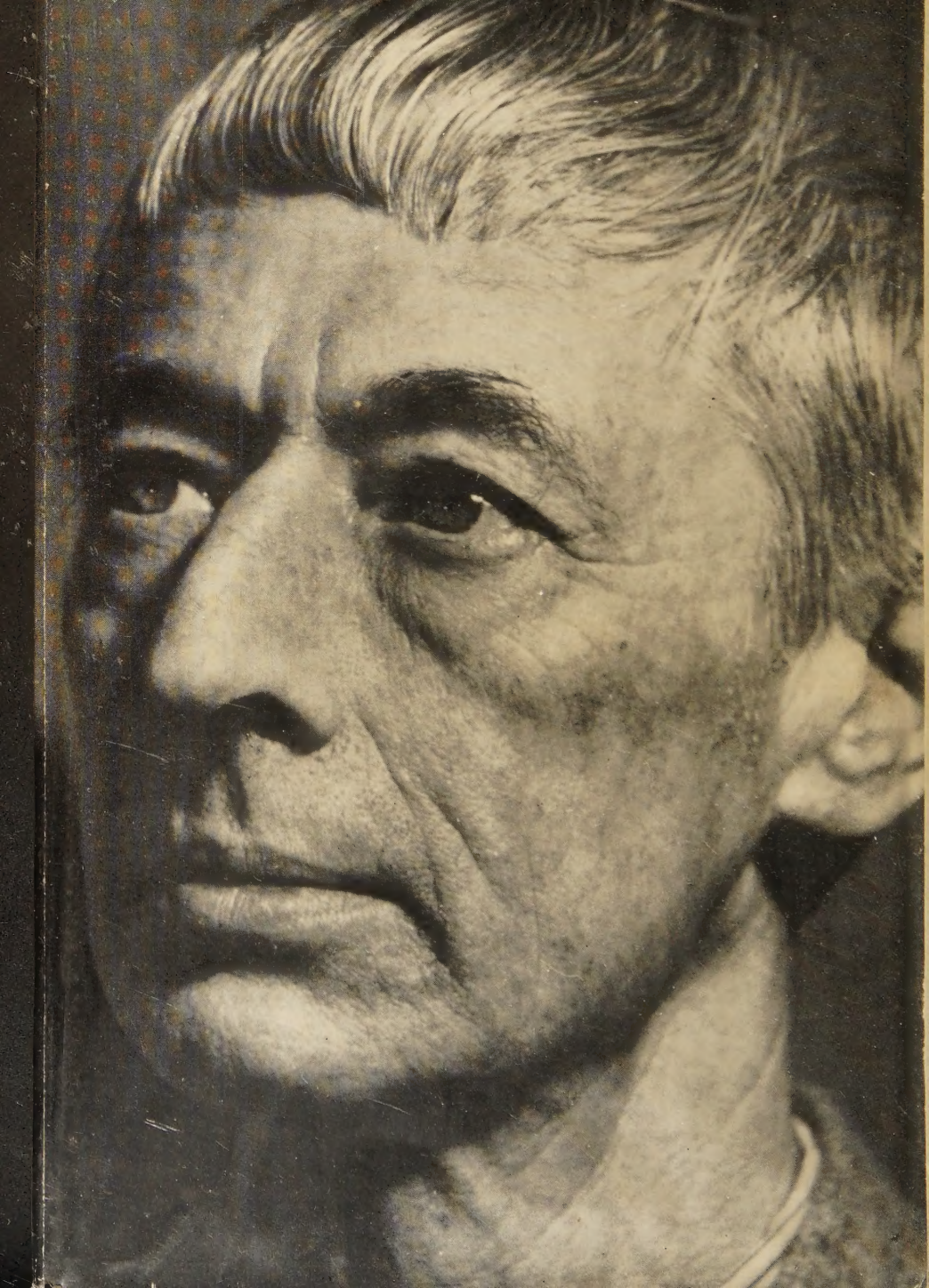
THE END

Norman Lindsay

was born at Creswick, Victoria, in 1879, the fourth son of Dr Robert Lindsay who emigrated from Londonderry, Ireland. His mother was the eldest daughter of the Rev. Thomas Williams, a notable missionary and anthropologist.

Norman Lindsay is probably the most controversial figure in Australian art. His line drawings, etchings, watercolours and oils have often created a sensation when shown to the public.

As a writer, he has achieved equal fame—in the United States and Great Britain, as well as in Australia. His works include: *The Magic Pudding, Saturdee, A Curate in Bohemia, Creative Effort, The Cautious Amorist* (also banned in Australia), *Pan in the Parlor, Age of Consent* and *Cousin from Fiji*, and there are several yet to be published.

It would be impossible in this small space to give even a reasonable picture of Norman Lindsay, his talents and his influence. He is considered by many to be a great leader in cultural life in Australia; certainly he has been a great inspiration to many of our writers and poets. Mr Douglas Stewart in his essay 'The Flesh and the Spirit' says: 'When he talks about poetry to a poet, it is with the assurance of a critic who has written on the subject in the *Bulletin*, in *Vision* and in the *Lone Hand*, and who is an expert on the men he most admires, Shakespeare, Burns, Byron and Browning.'

Norman Lindsay's biography has yet to be written. He has often said: 'I care not what they write or say about me, so long as it is the truth.' For a more detailed appraisal of the man and his talents we would recommend to readers the issue of the Australian literary quarterly *Southerly* (No. 1, 1959), a special number in honour of his 80th birthday.